

## The Swan King and the Fairy Traveler

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# The Swan King and the Fairy Traveler

by [nompuehuenu](#)

## Summary

Once upon a time, there lived a vain king who angered the wrong sorcerer. Being transformed into a hideous monster, he hid in a forest and dwelled on the lake inside it, cursed to remain alone and unloved... that is, until a certain prince stumbles across the lake who no one was supposed to visit. Will the curse finally break?

Or,

Swan Lake meets Beauty and the Beast, but it's GerIta.

## Notes

A few weeks ago, I went with my family to see Swan Lake in the theater and... it was magical, we bought the tickets like a year ago and they were expensive, but it was worth it, I had the best time ever and I actually shed some tears. It didn't help that Tchaikovsky's ballets are a special interest of mine and soon I was already making it GerIta, since combining two favorite things you have is the best way to get a third favorite thing. And to me, is this AU. I know I have two other works in progress, but also... Swan Lake GerIta. (גֶּרְאִיטָה)

Fun fact! Ludwig II of Bavaria, also called the Swan King or the Fairy Tale King (der Märchenkönig) was King of Bavaria, a state in the south-east of Germany. He was deemed a Mad King since he commissioned the construction of lavish palaces (such as Neuschwanstein Castle, which is my favorite place in the whole world) instead of attending to his affairs and duties. He was also a patron of Richard Wagner himself! That man lived for the arts, and he also wrote in letters about his inner battle with his homosexuality. What an icon, honestly, he deserved better.

Anyways, it might seem a bit OOC at first, but I promise there's more to the story. (¬\_¬)/  
(πωΠ)

## Scène & Waltz

### Chapter Notes

I know, I know, I have too many stories for a single person, but also brainrot goes brrrr.  
(^-^\*)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Once upon a time, in a forgotten kingdom, a selfish king used his people's gold to build castles and statues of himself, which he adored to look at. So great was his greed and vanity that he was named the Swan King and he decided he wanted to build the greatest castle ever made on top of a magical lake, surrounded by a dense forest. However, that lake was the home of a sorcerer who the villagers feared deeply, since he was as powerful as he was dangerous. The king didn't care though, and offered to buy the lake and the land surrounding it for an exorbitant amount of gold. When the sorcerer refused to accept it, the king was stunned and could not understand how someone would reject his money, for the lake was the source of life for the sorcerer and many other magical creatures. If they built a castle with so many earthly riches near it, it would be contaminated with greed.

But the king didn't care. He started building his castle anyway, with no permission nor consent. When the first stones were placed around the lake, the sorcerer tried to stop the king, telling him that such selfishness would doom him and his people. The king didn't care and ignored his warnings, ordering the guards to take the insolent man away. The sorcerer tried to reason with the king once again, but he was so annoyed by that peasant's words that he figured he should let him know he was above all living beings. And so, he slayed a magical creature in front of the sorcerer's eyes, threatening he would be next if he dared to show his face in front of him again.

Enraged and in deep sorrow, the sorcerer put a spell on the king, cursing him to guard the lake he so much desired... as a hideous monster who not even his most loyal subjects would recognize. *“Everytime the great sun rises, thee shall become a hideous beast and guard the land thee failed to protect, until the very last of thy breaths. The moon shall be thy only companion and the only witness of thy loneliness,”* the sorcerer claimed in a heartbreakin roar. *“To break this spell is to make the purest soul fall in love with thee, not with thy riches or thy appearance, but with a true redemption of thy heart.”*

At first, the king didn't believe the sorcerer and expelled him from his new castle, deeming his words as nonsense. That night, he went to his chambers and rested on a bed made of pure gold, deciding to dream about his greatness, but when the dawn started to come, the king felt such a torturous pain in his body he couldn't even scream. It was as if thousands of knives were pushed into his bones, rearranging them and destroying his body. Running to ease his pain in the clear waters of the lake, he saw his reflection for the very first time and he was so

horrified he fled to the deepest parts of the forest, never to be seen again. His people were confused, but no one really searched for him since he was not loved by them.

Soon, his kingdom declined with no king to rule over them and all the peasants migrated to other places to survive, forgetting where they even came from. The lake had been contaminated as the sorcerer feared and all the magical creatures ran away, searching for a new home. The king, no, the hideous monster was left all alone, with only his horrible reflection on the lake keeping him company, remembering the words of the one who cursed him. He could become normal once again if a pure soul fell in love with him... But who could love such a monstrous being? Some say the ruins of the kingdom still exist, but no one really knows where it is located. If you try to search for it, you will become lost and disoriented and will return to the start of the forest, just like waking up from a dream. In the distance, though, you could hear the fluttering of wings and the faint cry of a man who tried to keep himself hidden in shame. It is said it's the Swan King, lamenting his fate to remain forever alone and monstrous due to his own vanity and greed.



“That’s... a really scary fairy tale to tell kids.”

“Well, it’s part of our history. It teaches our children to never be as vain and greedy as the Swan King or else they will become ugly like him.” The woman explained in her thick accent, caressing the blonde hair of the little girl next to her and pinching her cheeks teasingly, much to the kid’s annoyance. “Now, please finish your *Rinderroulade!* You travelled from far away, didn’t you? I’ve never heard about your homeland... then again, I doubt anyone here in *Schwanenberg* knows anything that isn’t potatoes and gemstones.”

That made Feliciano chuckle and cut the rolled beef with a knife in a perfectly smooth movement, elegance overflowing from his gestures. The little girl kept looking at him from the other side of the table, a clear admiration reflected in her green eyes.

He had arrived a few hours ago with only a backpack and a strange instrument none of the villagers ever saw before. His clothes, although simple, were made of such expensive and fine material that it was obvious he was an aristocrat on the run, but because he was so cheerful and kind to everyone, some thought he was just adventuring away from the responsibilities that came with such status. That village was a fairly new one, formed by miners in search of gemstones and their families. It was called *Schwanenberg*, which meant Swan Mountain and at first, Feliciano thought it was because that tall mountain next to the forest kind of resembled a swan, but it turned out there was a legend like that...

“It was my mother’s generation that discovered the books that told the legend,” the woman explained. “At first they didn’t believe it, so those stupid men took their pickaxes and went to the forest to keep searching for gems and hidden treasures, but they all returned as if they drank something strange! So confused and crying like newborns. Everytime someone tried to enter the forest, they would return and keep blabbering something about a lake and a monster, so we decided to just stay in our lane. It’s better that way, we can reach the stone just fine from here. So be sure to not walk too close to the forest, you hear me?”

“*Mutti, mutti,*” The girl interrupted. “He’s just like a prince... or maybe like a fairy... or a Fairy Prince... and he has a fairy instrument too!”

“Shush! Gisela, what did I tell you? Be polite!”

“It doesn’t bother me, ma’am. I understand, it must be the first time anyone from my homeland came here, so they are curious about me.”

“Jeez, I told you to just call me Hildegard... But that’s alright. I suppose that’s what’s normal in your land. What was it called again?”

“Unicornate Kingdom.”

“Yes, that. Never heard of it.” The woman shrugged in a carefree gesture, but after a few seconds she placed both her hands on the table and stopped smiling. “Why did you even come this far? Did your parents kick you out or...? If you are a criminal, you have to prove to me you aren’t going to harm me or my family, do you understand?”

Anyone guilty would feel uncomfortable at this head-on confrontation, but Feliciano just lifted his lips in a charming and gentle smile, enough to enchant anyone who looked at him as if he was born to be in the spotlight and enjoying it. However, he still put a clear line between the audience and him, as if they lived in different worlds. This was the case with the woman in front of him, who tried to examine his expressions to no avail.

“I assure you, ma’am, I’m only an adventurer exploring the world. I mean no harm to anyone, especially those who share their kindness with me. And what delicious kindness, might I add!” He took a bite of the food, enjoying the taste as if he’d never had anything as delicious as this. “Really, I have to implore you to give me the recipe, when I get home I will miss this delicious dish.”

“Oh, you flatterer.” Hildegard let out a sigh of relief and then a laugh, almost as if they never walked in a single and tense rope of mistrust. She was a fearsome woman, protecting her own even in the face of a man who was probably a noble or maybe a criminal. That gained his respect, especially since he didn’t remember what his own mother was like. Maybe she would act just like her if he was ever in danger. What a nice thought. “I will write it for you, but first I need to prepare for my husband’s arrival. As a payment for the food, you can entertain Gisela, since you didn’t bring any money with you.”

And that was true, he was totally poor. Feliciano gazed at the little girl, who shyly averted her eyes and kept eating as if she didn't spend the whole dinner looking at him. He seemed to be used to it, though.

*“Signorina Gisela,”* He called out to her. *“I really don’t know any good spots in this town to practice my music... would you please spare me some of your precious time and show me around? I will even sing for you as a token of my appreciation.”*

The girl's eyes lit up in a gorgeous emerald color and she nodded energetically, standing up and taking Feliciano's hand. Sparing not a single glance to her mother, who looked at her both touched and tired of her daughter's daydreaming, she shouted:

“Follow me!”

## ၁၁၁

Pressing the keys of his strange instrument, a multitude of children, young men and women gathered around him, admiring the enchanting sound of both his voice and the *ghironda*, which is what he called the complicated and magical object he brought from his land. Feliciano sang a calm and almost whispering melody, fit for a lullaby.

“I know you, I walked with you once upon a dream... I know you, that look in your eyes is so familiar, a gleam, and I know it's true that visions are seldom all they seem.”

All eyes were on him and they brimmed with amazement and intrigue; the audience was enchanted by a single man's voice, who showed them a land of both magic and fantasy. To villagers who only ever saw forest and mountain, this sound was coming straight from a dream, but even dreams were made of what they knew. This was something completely strange and new, and the foreigner sitting in front of them was guiding them through it with the grace of an otherwordly being.

"But if I know you, I know what you'll do," The sweetness that he pronounced those words with was overflowing, the love ballad causing some of the couples in the audience to lean towards each other. "You'll love me at once, the way you did once upon a dream."

With a sound similar to a violin's, his humming was accompanied by the strange instrument's cords, pulling the crank in a perfectly coordinated and elegant movement. He made it seem effortless, but the amount of hand to head coordination always put a toll in his already tired body. Despite this, he kept humming and playing for his audience who could only sit and watch as this fairy prince sang to an unknown lover.

A lover he met in a dream.

The tune gradually stopped being a lullaby and started to become a waltz; Feliciano looked at the couples, giving them a wink to indicate they could dance to their heart's content. And cheerful villagers loved to dance, so it didn't take long for the solemn performance to become a dancing party in which the young couples flirted and flirted. The women lifted their skirts with one hand and held their lover's in the other while the men kicked the ground in glee, enjoying the chance to do something else than work or drink. The kids sang along, already memorizing the short verses of the song and the whole situation was akin to a fairy tale's opening scene, much to Feliciano's delight.

"But if I know you, I know what you'll do, you'll love me at once, the way you did once upon a dream!"

"Eek! Hannah is kissing Karl on the mouth!"

"Gross!"

The kids pointed at the couples and made fun of them while singing the catchy tune.

"Rainer, when will you ask Edith for a dance? She's been staring at you for the last ten minutes...!"

"I will, I will, Jürgen, I just need some time to... A-ah, she's coming this way! W-what do I say?"

"Uhm, I don't know, hi? How are you? I love you?"

"I can't tell her that!"

"Tell me what?"

"H-hi, Edith! How are you? I love you?"

"... Are you asking me if you love me?"

"..."

And the laughs didn't stop, they couldn't. As if it were magic, the somber and somewhat boring village had come to life, dancing and singing and pouring their hearts out. Rainer and Edith were both standing near and Feliciano decided this was the perfect time to improvise and show what a bard was truly made of.

"Oh, Edith, what will you do now? Accept his love?" He sang in the same melody, a mischievous smile on his lips. "Oh, Rainer, go and take her hand, if you even dare! Or perhaps I will invite her to travel with me, and if you know her, you know what she'll do..."

Standing up and carrying the *ghironda* towards the two lovebirds, the bard pushed Rainer towards her, putting his all in this performance when he declared his own rejection, his expression dramatically changing to improve his performance:

"She'll reject me now, since we all know how deep she loves you!"

With a face as bright as fresh tomatoes, Feliciano left them both to the village's laughs and cheers, still playing until he finally gave in to the exhaustion, falling once again to his chair and resting his hands, though no one noticed. The spotlight wasn't his anymore, he decided to let the village itself have it. It was too noisy, though, so after a few minutes he stood up once again and walked to press his back against one of the trees that were more hidden, looking for a place where no one would disturb him. For now, he wanted to rest and maybe close his eyes for a little while, maybe finally meeting *him* once again. That is, until he heard a rustle.

"Are you tired?"

Gisela asked in a worried tone, being the only person who noticed him shy away from the spotlight.

"Yes, I haven't rested since coming here. It probably wasn't a good idea to sing."

"But it was pretty..."

"You think so? That makes me happy, thank you."

Patting her blonde locks, Feliciano let out a sigh, staring at the now orange-tinged horizon. It was getting late, the sun was setting.

"*Mutti* said you can sleep in our house, we have a guest room! Even if we don't usually have any guests."

"Really? That's such a nice gesture." Feliciano gave her a smile charming enough to make the girl blush. "But I can't accept it, since I can only sleep outdoors."

That made Gisela raise an eyebrow, confused and a bit worried.

"Why?"

"Because..." The bard made a gesture, indicating it was a secret for her ears only. Gisela felt her heart thumping in excitement at the possibility of sharing a secret with the strange and mysterious traveler, so with no doubt in her eyes she leaned towards him. "Fairies live in the woods, not in houses."

And with that, he smiled, knowing exactly how the girl would react at his silly lie. Stuttering and with an expression of total shock, she mumbled:

"I, I knew it...!"

"But you can't tell this to anyone, okay? It's our secret."

Feliciano lifted one of his fingers and pressed it on his lips in a silent motion, telling her to stay quiet. Gisela imitated the man and nodded, but her flushed cheeks and wide smile were far too obvious.

"I will tell *mutti* you found another place to stay so she won't bother you."

"Smart girl! Now go, they will start suspecting us if you go home too late!"

They both giggled and Gisela nodded once again, waving goodbye while she hurriedly walked through the bushes to reunite with the other kids, who were preparing to go home. The sight was oddly familiar to Feliciano who couldn't help but picture himself in them.

It was long ago, when he was a child just like them.

"Come on, Feli! Aren't you a man? The tree isn't that tall!"

"B-but I'm scared..."

"Don't be! I'm right here, I will protect you. Now stop being a scaredy cat!"

"Don't call me that or I'll tell *nonno*!"

"Scaredy cat, scaredy cat!"

"Stoooop!"

"I won't stop until you climb the stupid tree! What, can you only do these things in your dumb dreams?"

His brother would always tease him since he knew how emotional Feliciano was. Those days where they played and laughed were so precious to him, he kept them in his memory like a treasure. But they would never come back. Once their grandfather passed away, all responsibilities and burdens fell on his brother, the oldest, the heir. The crown prince.

"The king died!"

"What will happen now? The princes are still so young..."

"Well, that means that I will become their guardian until they come of age!"

"You...! Of course not! That would be me!"

"You heartless people, taking advantage of the situation... since all of you lack the care to guide the kids, I will do it."

"You are one to talk, Mister I-Embezzle-Charity-Funds!"

"There was no proof!!"

While they were still mourning, their relatives fought like hyenas for a place in the palace, and since they couldn't claim the throne itself due to the king's last will, they wanted to gain control of the two princes as if they were puppets. Where did all those kind people who wasted no time in flattering the royal family go? Their smiles were fake, he knew that now, but at the time, he felt as if he was loved by everyone. The illusion shattered and the glass had hit his naive child self, nailing itself to become painful scars that were still not healed.

*"Fratello, I'm scared... they looked so scary. Why are they so angry? What will happen to us?"*

Feliciano clearly remembers the way he clung to his brother's arms, crying. They weren't that far off in age, barely a few minutes of difference, but his brother still had to carry such a heavy weight... and he took it with pride, holding his trembling little brother with his own fragile hands. With a faint voice that revealed he was also crying, he promised:

"It's okay. I will protect you. No one will dare to touch us."

They were only twelve when they had to grow fangs and claws in order to protect themselves from the hungry stares of greedy adults, although to be fair, it was his brother who did all the work while Feliciano cowered in fear.

"I, Crown Prince Lovino, will inherit the throne. I have no need for a guardian, if you wish to stay in the palace, you shall be teachers and servants only. If you dare to be more than that or if you mock me or my brother..." He raised the scepter and kicked the ground with it, ordering the entrance of someone to the room. A criminal that once held many riches and an

important place in the court, guilty of coveting the prince's place. Completely beaten up and with traces of torture in his body, the criminal kneeled and showed his lifeless face to the nervous audience; he had no tongue to speak any insolences anymore and he had been stripped of all rebelliousness. "You will be next."

Feliciano opened his eyes, returning to the present and looked up towards the moon high in the sky.

"Fairy, she said... Well, they are sometimes depicted as vicious monsters, after all."

Nobility was a den of beasts and their filthy blood ran through his veins. Greedy, vain and cowardly...

"I hope this time I'll have a nice dream."

Accommodating himself against the three, Feliciano used a velvet mantle to cover from the cold, chuckling under his breath. Even far away from home and saying he was done with luxuries and aristocracy, he was still wrapped in uselessly expensive things. What a joke he was.

—♪❀❀—

His dreams were lucid and he always knew when he was dreaming, because he would always feel as light as a feather both mentally and physically. Right now, he wasn't sleeping in the woods, instead he was by a beautiful lake, sitting beside it. The same lake he always saw in dreams and where he would meet the same man, but he always took his time coming to their meeting place. Sinking his naked feet in the water, he started to hum a melody he didn't remember learning and waited patiently. Soon, he heard the rustle of grass behind him and alas, there he was. Sleek blonde hair elegantly brushed and clear blue eyes, belonging to the muscular and tall man who seemed to be always wearing a worried and stern expression.

"You're here!" Feliciano exclaimed, his face brightening up while he stood up, running to hug the blonde stranger. But he wasn't a stranger, he was the man he fell in love with all

those years ago when they first met.

When he was a young child, his dreams would be scary and painful even during the happiest of his days with his family, grandfather and brother. The dreams always dark and always torturing him endlessly, causing him to become scared and shy even during the day. But one night, the dreams changed and the scenery became a beautiful forest surrounding a lake, in which he met that man. Of course, the first time he saw him he was the same age as him, or at least he appeared to be; barely taller than him and with a gorgeous outfit that made him look like a fairy tale prince. Since then, they would age at the same time and would always dance at the same spot; now with simple clothes that belonged to a commoner, the stranger would never speak a word, but his expressions and gestures were enough for Feliciano to know what he was like. A bit grumpy, a bit shy and very, very gentle, always caressing his cheeks as if he was made of glass and with movements akin to a prince in shining armor, dancing with elegance.

At first, Feliciano was scared of him and his aloof expression. He was a cowardly child, after all, but every time he would run away from him, the stranger would wait for him in the lake and make flower crowns, offering them in an attempt to cheer him up. It was these little gestures that claimed Feliciano's heart, who probably grew up as kind as he was thanks to the dreams he shared with that person. The real world was painful for him, but at night he could escape from it and learn that there was beauty hidden somewhere, just like those kind blue eyes were hidden behind an angry expression.

"I missed you." Feliciano whispered, hiding his face in the other's chest, who hugged him back a bit awkwardly. "Today was rough, but it was also a lot of fun. There were many beautiful ladies and a lot of children too. We all laughed and danced and they treated me like a fairy, there was even a girl confessing to me and asking for my hand in marriage."

The man's expression hardened a bit, which made Feliciano chuckle.

"Jealous?"

He nodded.

"You don't have to be. You are the one I love the most."

That made the man blush to his ears, averting his eyes in a shy gesture that really didn't match his tall and strong self. Despite never saying anything, it was so easy to read his thoughts since they were written all over his face. Now he was pouting, since Feliciano was laughing at him and his cute demeanor.

"Don't be mad! I'm sorry, I didn't mean to laugh at you." He said, although the giggles didn't stop. Taking both his hands with his own, he guided the man towards a certain spot in the ground. "Come on, I'll sing for you as an apology, so please forgive me... pretty please?"

The man looked at Feliciano for a few seconds and finally sighed, his expression saying clearly he couldn't win against him. With a small "yay!" the brunette guided the other and they sat together, the grass being ticklish to the touch of their bare feet. Leaning against the blonde's chest, the gentle strings of a violin started to play even if there were no instruments there, but it was a dream so it didn't matter. If Feliciano so desired, in that world the sky could be painted in red and wine could rain from the sky, but what he actually wanted was a nice moment with his beloved.

"I know you, I walked with you once upon a dream..."

He recited the same melody he sang that day, but this time, the sweetness dripping from his voice was almost tangible. He placed his hand on top of the other's, hearing so clearly the heartbeat of his lover he could almost mistake this for the real world.

"I know you, that look in your eyes is so familiar, a gleam. And you know it's true, that visions are seldom all they seem... But if I know you, I know what you'll do, you'll love me at once the way you did once upon a dream."

Humming the next tunes, he saw how the wind made the water in the lake move, the grass brushing against both their skins and the smell of flowers he didn't know. This place was still unfamiliar for him even after so many years, so he never ventured too far. His lover also didn't allow him to enter the woods, never really explaining why, just seeming worried and... a bit sad. He didn't want to make him have that expression, so he decided he would just stay there. It wasn't that bad, actually, he preferred that place that seemed to be the home of fairies due to how ethereal it looked, like coming from another world. Just like the song he was dedicating to the stranger. It wasn't a traditional song of his homeland, the Unicornate

Kingdom, and it wasn't from any of the neighboring nations. He thought that perhaps it was from the region of *Schwanenberg*, since most of the villagers seemed to be familiar with the waltz and tempo, but he had no further evidence and the people probably weren't that familiar with music, since they were a small mining town. Where did he learn this melody, then? It was strange.

He had stopped singing, getting lost in his thoughts and the blonde man had touched Feliciano's hand in a gentle attempt to get his attention. Once Feliciano realized he had gotten distracted, he blushed faintly, feeling as if he got caught doing something bad. What was he doing wasting the precious time with his beloved? Ah, what a selfish man he was!

"I'm sorry." He apologized, but the taller man shook his head and simply caressed his hand. This gesture was so warm, so real, but... "It's just... I want to stay here. I never want to go back home."

It wasn't clear what he was referring to, and he didn't know either. Maybe he wanted to stay in the village, or maybe in the dream world. Who knows. That made the blonde man frown and shake his head, indicating he didn't like when Feliciano said those things. But he couldn't stop; like a flood, all his most hidden fears were starting to pour out. With a pale face, the brunette started to stutter and clung to the other's clothes.

"No matter how much I look at you. When I wake up, I can't remember either your name or your face, or even this lake." He whispered, sensing his voice crack and closing his eyes, doing his best to recall the other's face, but once it was out of sight, he was unable to even remember what shade of blue his eyes were. "Even now, it's like I'm cursed to forget all about you. I fear one day, once I wake up, I won't remember you at all, as if you never even existed."

He looked at the blonde man once again, who pressed his lips together, a sign of discomfort. Feliciano couldn't see quite well with all the tears clouding his gaze. With his emotions changing and darkening, the weather in the meadow started darkening as well, with black clouds settling on top of them. Placing one hand on his beloved's cheek, Feliciano's deepest fears and worries started to overflow and, with each word he spoke rain started to fall. It wasn't wine, of course. Just cold water weakening the illusion of peace in that lake.

"Why do we meet only in dreams? Does this place actually exist? Are you even real...?"

The question broke the brunette's heart, and with that, the rain became a storm. The stranger didn't say anything even in that situation and just stared at him, wearing an expression that was difficult to describe. Feliciano clutched his hands around the taller man in a futile attempt to keep him close.

"Please, don't let me wake up. Don't leave me alone."

The blonde man pressed his hands against Feliciano's back, clumsily hugging him and trying to comfort him, but he knew that wasn't enough and his lack of voice wasn't helping. Despite all this time looking detached from this dream world, this was the first time he'd ever showed such affection towards Feliciano on his own accord. The rain kept pouring and the lake was somehow drying up, nothing making sense and everything going wrong. That's when the stranger took Feliciano's face with his hands, gently raising it to allow the brunette to look at him. Even if this face would be forgotten once the sun rose, they could still enjoy these last moments they had.

*"Come find me at the lake."* he pronounced, making not a single sound and leaning towards the prince, barely touching his lips in an attempted first kiss, but...

The dream was over.

The sun had begun to come out and Feliciano had opened his eyes, returning to the cold and lonely world. He tried to sit against the tree he had chosen that night, but his tears wouldn't stop and his body felt so weak he could barely move.

"I can't remember your face." He muttered with a bitter smile, clenching his fist on top of his chest as he felt like it was being torn in half, but then he remembered what his lover had said, or at least tried to.

Did that mean he was out there? He mentioned a lake, so maybe he had to search around lakes. As obvious as it was, it was the first time he had ever "spoken". This was a signal. It meant he was somewhere, waiting for him. If they met in the real world... could they finally share their first kiss? Could they talk until midnight? Could they laugh and sing together?

Could he finally know his name and remember his face?

"They said there was a lake inside the forest, right...?"

## Chapter End Notes

\* Rinderroulade: A German meat dish, usually consisting of bacon, onions, mustard and pickles wrapped in thinly sliced beef which is then cooked.

\* Mutti: Mom

\* Signorina: Miss, Lady

\* Ghironda: Hurdy-gurdy, a string instrument that produces sound by a hand-crank-turned, rosined wheel rubbing against the strings. I chose to use Ghironda instead since it's what it's called in Italian and I like how it sounds better than hurdy-gurdy.

EDIT: I fixed some spelling errors and I added a section that got deleted for some reason near the end of the chapter, for that I apologize. I hope it reads better now. (m;\_\_ )m

Also, reading the chapter with the original ballet score is really good, you guys should try it out. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-yvvTy7aBc&list=PL29745CBC5FCF10AA&index=1>) For this first chapter, I think it's from Introduction to the Valse. It sounds really good.

## Pas de trois

### Chapter Notes

I know I have two other stories that haven't been updated, but also... this story just makes me work at full-speed. It's just that powerful. I will put as many references as I want. (¬▽¬)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

His back hurt a little, but not enough to become a problem. At least not for now. He had left most of his things in the same spot he slept in, since he didn't want to walk around with all his stuff on. After brushing his hair with his fingers, he decided he would stop by to see Hildegard and Gisela, since he still felt a bit guilty for lying to her. Knocking on the door like a gentleman, he waited patiently. He could hear the woman's voice scolding her daughter, who answered with what he could only assume was a tantrum.

Chuckling slightly, he was greeted by Hildegard, who had a small plum in one hand and a knife in the other. Threatening maybe, but Feliciano was sure she wouldn't slice him to pieces... at least not in front of her daughter.

"Feliciano!" She said, smiling. "What a nice surprise. It's quite early, isn't it? Gisela told me you were staying with the Becker's, but because I got into an argument with Liselotte, I didn't check... what an annoying woman she is, seriously, it's a miracle her son Rainer is so well-behaved."

Mumbling to herself, Feliciano felt grateful she didn't talk to that family. He might be a bad influence, but Gisela saved him; she was so smart she chose her lie carefully, knowing her mother's relationship with others. What a sharp girl, honestly, and that girl was now arguing with her mother, who told her to stop reading and put the plates on the table for breakfast.

"Ughh, I told you I would do it in a bit, *mutti!* Just wait for a few... O-oh! It's the Fairy Prince!" She said, blushing slightly after being caught arguing with her mother. She was sitting on the floor next to an unlit fireplace and with an old book on her legs. Feliciano tilted his head after entering the house, but before he could say anything, Gisela patted the spot next to her, calling him. "Look, look. This is the storybook where we have all our fairy tales, including the one *mutti* told you about yesterday."

"I remember I also used to read it all day, just like you. Ah, the memories... Gisela, you have to be careful with it. It's really old and fragile! You always used to break your toys for fun, so don't you dare do the same to the book!"

"I know, *mutti*!"

Hildegard couldn't contain a grin, embarrassing her daughter was really fun. Feliciano smiled as well, his chest warming up when seeing the loving relationship they had. He couldn't help but feel envious, so he decided to place all his attention on the storybook. Sitting besides the child, she tapped on one of the pages. It read "*Fairy Giselle*."

"This was *mutti's* favorite story, she named me after the main character. Can you read it for me?"

"Me?"

"Yes! I like your voice. It will probably sound so much prettier if you read it."

Well, if small Gisela wanted to, he couldn't say no to those sparkling eyes. He grabbed the storybook with both hands, carefully placing it on his lap and treating it with the utmost care.

*"Fairy Giselle.*

*Once upon a time, there was a beautiful and kind fairy named Giselle. She lived in the forest with her fairy sisters, playing in the lake nearby. However, Giselle was curious about the outside world and longed to experience love. To become a human.*

*Her sisters wanted to stop her, but when a handsome traveler was injured near the lake, Giselle healed him and inevitably fell in love, wiping her tears with her trembling hands. The man, stunned by her beauty and kindness, also fell for her and asked for her hand in marriage. She accepted and they ventured outside the forest until they reached the tall walls of a castle. The man was actually a prince who was wandering in search of true love, having finally found it. However, once they entered the castle, all the people were skeptical of Giselle. A strange woman coming out of nowhere and claiming their prince's heart...*

*Some called her a hag. A temptress. An evil witch who wanted to take control of the kingdom. A fairy is highly sensitive to emotions, so all these thoughts were like poison to Giselle, who quickly fell ill. Seeing this, the mighty but stern king ordered his son to marry a lady of noble descent instead of a sick woman. The prince rejected and claimed he belonged to his lover only, heartbroken and unable to foresee the human world being this dangerous for a fairy. Falling to his knees beside her bed, Giselle told him she still treasured discovering love with him and that she wouldn't change anything for it.*

*The prince cried, and from his tears, Giselle healed just like she healed him. Giselle kissed the prince and became human just like she wished; they conquered all odds, their love so strong no one could oppose it; they were crowned king and queen and they had two children, both looking just like Giselle, who lived happily ever after with her true love."*

Feliciano finished the story, but he couldn't help but press his lips together. It was a nice fairy tale, simple and easy to follow, but the ending... it felt sloppy and out of place. Like it was a last minute addition. It was difficult to explain, so he decided he wouldn't read too deeply into it. Gisela, on the other hand, was looking directly at him, clearly waiting for his judgment.

"It's a beautiful story." Feliciano said, tracing with his fingers the pictures of the last paragraph. It was the fairy Giselle, hugging two kids who resembled her and the prince standing alongside them, wearing a crown. They were like the perfect family, too perfect for his taste, but he wouldn't tell that to a little girl who held no guilt.

"I know!" Gisela giggled, relieved once the fairy prince approved the story. "I'm so glad Giselle got her happy ending. She suffered too much."

He agreed with that, and he even felt kind of reflected on that story. A naive fairy venturing to the outside world with no plan and just following her heart? That was pretty much spot on for his situation, especially now that he was following a dream he could barely remember. Gisela looked at him once the silence settled in. Only Hildegard's hums could be heard and the sound of the knife chopping plums.

"Are you going out today?" She asked timidly.

"Yes, I want to explore. The landscapes are so different from what I'm used to, I want to see more."

Gisela stayed quiet for a few seconds, her bright emerald gaze becoming impossible to decipher.

“There are lots of pretty places to look at, but you need to be careful of the forest. *Mutti* said so.”

“I know, thank you for worrying about me, *signorina* Gisela.”

That made her smile again, retrieving the book and holding onto it like it was a treasure. It was, actually. A treasure that contained so many stories from so many years ago, all surrounding a mysterious lake inside the forest. Was the lake from the Giselle fairy tale the same as the Swan King’s? Maybe, but fairy tales were just that; tales. Stories meant to teach children something, not always being truthful. And dreams... They could be the same, but Feliciano wanted to have hope and foolishly cling to it.

He waved goodbye, accepting a piece of a plum cake the mother had been baking beforehand for her husband to take to work, and he went on his way. It was really good, the ripe plums were sweet and they mixed deliciously into the warm dough. The streusel’s clumpy texture was contrasted with the softness of the sliced plums, making one of the tastiest sweets he had ever tried. Sadly, he wasn’t that hungry, so after a few bites he wrapped the slice of cake in the handkerchief Gisela had lended him and, once he found his things still hidden, he did his best to balance everything. The backpack on his back, the *ghironda* in one hand and the plum cake on the other.

The lack of hunger wasn’t because of nothing. Actually, he was really nervous to the point he could feel his stomach turn and twist itself, making him unable to even think about food without feeling sick. He was a very cowardly man, after all, and after hearing the story about the lake inside the forest, he feared he would become another victim. However, the words spoken by the stranger were still fresh in his mind and he was already entering the forest, so now he couldn’t go back. Or at least, when he tried looking behind him after a few steps, he found himself unable to recognize the way back to the village.

Okay. This was totally not strange and he was totally not panicking.

Feliciano took a few breaths, doing his best to stay calm and kept walking, being careful not to trip. The forest was dense and the trees grew very close to each other, the protruding roots

were high and very dangerous for a pampered prince like himself, but he already decided he would search for the lake. Ah, the lake, that stupid lake, now it didn't even sound like a word to him anymore since it was all he could think of. A bit spooked by the sensation of being watched, he started humming the song from his dreams, the melody calming his nerves enough to not cry right there. Perhaps entering a dense forest with a backpack, an instrument and a piece of cake was not the best of ideas, but he was a man of the arts, not a man of logic. And now he was dealing with the consequences.

“Ah, seriously! What am I even doing here?” He asked himself, leaning onto one of the tree trunks nearby. The sweat was making his hands slippery and he was sure he was barely ten minutes in that stroll, but he already felt as if he had run from one village to the other. He hadn't bathed either, so he felt dirty and uncomfortable wearing the same clothes he had been using for three days straight. “If I find that godforsaken lake, I will use it to clean myself.”

Just then, he believed he heard someone laugh and he felt the strength abandoning his legs in fear. Laughs? Inside that strange and scary forest? That surely wasn't good.

“H-hello?”

Silence. The high-pitched laughs he heard didn't appear again, so he assumed it was his imagination. For his own mental health's sake.

After resting for a few more minutes, he stood up and started walking again even if he had no sense of direction. He was probably walking in circles and that thought scared him greatly; the leaves were blocking out most of the sunlight, so he couldn't tell what time it was. He tried his best to keep calm, however, and kept humming to distract his thoughts. That is until he heard the laughs again, this time closer and clearer. They were childish, like belonging to a mischievous kid, and they were coming from behind him, hidden in the endless trees. It was multiple people laughing, whispering amongst themselves and keeping themselves concealed.

And that freaked him out.

Now unable to even think, Feliciano started running and hugging the instrument and the slice of plum cake, miraculously not tripping and hitting his head. His footsteps were agile and light, as if he was gifted at running away, and he tried to shout for help, but he knew no one

would help him. If he died, his body would never be found and it would probably be eaten by animals or those terrifying laughing people. He didn't want to die like that! He had so much to do and so many people to meet and so much tasty food to eat! Panting heavily, he looked behind him only to see a couple of lights floating inside the darkness of the forest, and oh, boy, did he not want to see that. Darkness was always scary for him, and now that he was left all alone it was worse. He felt the zone of his knees getting ripped by many bushes as he ran through them, but he didn't care about the pain or his ruined pants, he just wanted to get out of there. Strangely enough, with each step he took, the trees seemed to open the path for him, but he was probably imagining things since right now he was scared and panicking.

At the distance, he could see light and he ran straight towards it, closing his eyes in an attempt to not see the darkness until he managed to reach the exit. The laughs didn't stop until he finally could escape from the forest, being surprised by complete silence. No, it wasn't actually complete silence; once he opened his eyes, he saw... a lake.

Surrounded by green scenery and flowers, the waterfalls in the distance, the wind blowing through the leaves and the birds resting to drink made one of the most harmonious melodies he'd ever heard. This hidden place was like straight out of a painting, or even a dream. It was familiar, but he couldn't quite wrap his finger around it. It just felt... safe, with the lake itself being the only part of the scene where light could freely travel with no trees to impede it. Tired from his adrenaline rush, he walked slowly to inspect the place, leaving his things on top of a big rock with some moss growing. He of course left the plum cake slice on top of his backpack, since he didn't want it to catch any moss.

“It's... beautiful.” He whispered, the otherworldly beauty of this secret paradise taking the words away from him, and to leave a bard speechless was a great feat.

The lake's peaceful waves were disrupted by many small waterfalls that revealed it was connected to a long river and there was a spot right next to it, perfect for resting. With the gentle sunlight passing through the trees and reflecting in the water, Feliciano took off his boots and laughed once the ticklish sensation of grass touched his feet, but what he was enjoying the most was the fact that now he could bathe. There was no one obviously, and the water seemed clean and pure, so with no further consideration, he left his clothes next to the rock where his stuff rested and entered the lake. Carefully and getting startled by the cold, his naked body soon felt refreshed and recovered with each step he took, deeper into the water. Stroking his arms to clean them up, he took his sweet time in this improvised bath, thinking about nothing but how nice it felt until...

“*Quack!*”

A small, yellow duck had swam towards him. It was tiny. Really, really tiny, its feathers reminded Feliciano of gold and it had been quacking non-stop ever since it saw him. Somehow, it seemed angry, or perhaps surprised. Since it was a bird, Feliciano didn't feel shy being naked around it and he just smiled not in the way he usually did when performing or lying to others, just a simple and honest smile.

"Hello! Are you alone?" He asked, sinking a bit more into the water so he could be at the same level of the duck. When he looked around, he didn't see any other ducks, be it big or small. Strange. "What a beautiful home you live in, you are very lucky. My name is Feliciano, it's nice to meet you."

The duck tilted its head, as if it was utterly dumbfounded.

"What? Do ducks not introduce themselves? How rude!" He jokingly stated, laughing out loud without a care for the world. "You are really cute. May I call you *Paperella*? It means little duck in my language, and I think it suits you."

The duck started quacking again, flapping its wings in what seemed an angry gesture, but that only made Feliciano laugh even more.

"So cute! Wah, I think this is the first time I've seen a duckling up close."

He got closer and closer to the point his nose touched the duck's beak, who then swam away rapidly.

"Are you angry? I'm sorry! Please come back, Paperella. I'm lonely over here."

That last sentence seemed to click in the duck's head, who turned around to look at Feliciano. Strange, very strange, did that duck understand him? He doubted it, he was just playing around. There's no way a bird would understand what he was saying. When he saw the duck slowly swim towards him, Feliciano had an idea to test if it really understood him and, perhaps being a bit too abrupt, he stood and started walking towards his things, exposing his whole soft and pale body, a body which hadn't worked for a single day during his life and which retained most features of his youth. The duck quacked loudly and sank suddenly into the water, averting its eyes, but Feliciano didn't notice since he was searching for something inside his backpack. After a few seconds, he took out a fountain pen and a piece of paper, in which he drew something. Quickly and skillfully, the strokes were confident and if he wasn't naked right now, he would've looked like a respectable artist. The duck nervously peeked through its feathers, unable to hide its curiosity for a while now.

"Alright, done!" Feliciano announced and showed the bird his drawing. "This is you, Paperella. A duck."

The duck blinked once, and then twice with its big, round eyes. It was a really good drawing, shaded with light lines and depicting the duck swimming in the lake. After a while though it seemed to lose interest in the drawing and the way the human expected a reaction from it. It was difficult to understand an animal's expressions, but Feliciano could've sworn it seemed sad.

"You don't like it? Maybe I can draw another thing for you. How about... a human?"

But the duck seemed unimpressed, not reacting anymore even after two or three other drawings, which were left on the grass. It seemed this little experiment was unsuccessful.

"Maybe you are just a duck, after all."

Weirdly enough, he felt disappointed. Why, though? It was literally just a duck, how could it even understand him? It was probably curious seeing a human, that was all. Feliciano sighed, deciding to just let it go. Maybe he was still a bit dazed due to the whole laugh thing back at the forest.

Now he was clean, but his clothes weren't, so he decided to wash them in the lake as well much to the duck's annoyance. Feliciano didn't know how to actually wash clothes, so he

only soaked them and left them to dry on top of the rock, sensing the duck's gaze following him the whole time. He didn't mind, he thought it was funny.

While waiting for his clothes to dry, he decided to finish the plum cake and was about to take a bite when he heard another quack, this time louder. Looking behind him, he saw Paperella stare with what he could only describe as a hungry look.

"Mhm? What is it? Do you want to try it?" He asked, amused. "But I don't know if I should feed an animal cake, you might get sick..."

Hearing this, the duck quacked with horror at the possibility of not tasting the cake and without thinking twice, it flew straight towards the brunette like it wanted to fight him.

"Hey!"

Surprised, Feliciano could only watch as the bird took a big bite of the plum cake while the rest fell to the floor, since the prince was startled and had let go of the slice without meaning to. Blinking once and then twice, Feliciano pouted once he realized the plum cake Hildegarde made had gone to waste.

"You... you could've asked, you know?" Feliciano said, sighing, but he couldn't contain a smile when he saw how joyfully the duck ate the small piece he stole. "What do ducks even eat, anyways? I'm sure it's not cake... but then again, if you are a duck from this magical lake, you are probably magical yourself."

The duck stopped eating for a moment and then continued, although once it saw Feliciano offering it the remaining pieces of the cake, it blinked in astonishment.

"Here you go."

The duck shook its head and it entered the lake with its short legs, almost looking angry.

"What? Do you not want a piece of cake that fell to the floor? Jeez! What an elegant duck you are, Paperella."

So now he was stuck naked in this lake, with a dirty slice of plum cake and a duck that kept looking at him from the water. Even if there was no one else around and his dream didn't give any other clues, he felt at ease there. Maybe he could rest a bit, but he still wanted to talk to someone. His only audience was the duck, who seemed to be only interested in food.

"So... Paperella." He called, laying down in the grass. "Have you ever heard of pasta?"

—ξ⁹⁹⁹ξ—

Far away from the forest and the village, a hooded man kept mumbling to himself, the many vials and small bags tied up to his waist making a tinkling sound as he walked. He had been traveling for days with only his book and ingredients on him, all inside a ragged and old bag, but the way back home was as confusing as ever. He leaned against a withered tree, the sun going down at a quick pace, and a strange shadowy figure started to circle around him like it was smoke, although he didn't pay it any mind.

"I have to return soon," He said, fixing his blonde hair under the hood with his hands. "It's been, what? Fifty years? It must've healed by now, ah, but it's still such a pain walking towards it."

The shadowy figure took the vague form of a man, who laughed out loud and caressed the pale face of the hooded man with its dark and abstract limbs.

"And you only just realized you left some of your small creatures behind?" A deep male voice asked, dripping with honey but with not an ounce of gentleness. "What a pitiful sorcerer you are."

"Silence!" The man shouted, waving his arm to dismiss the smoke around him. Under the hood, he had made a deeply annoyed and disgusted face, much to the strange shadow creature's amusement. "I know that. I'm dumb and naive and all that bullshit you always say, can't you talk about anything else?"

The figure shrugged, or at least it looked like it did. The smoke that composed its body was both expressive and unexpressive at the same time.

"I will bring them back to me. I just hope they are okay... They've been trapped there with that beast for so long... You. How much left do we have until we reach the mountain?"

"Maybe a day or two." The figure answered, floating some few meters above the ground to check the distance.

The sorcerer found himself revitalized once he thought about the helpless beings that counted on him and he nodded, picking up his pace. The hand that rested on his bag had a single ring on its index finger; a golden ring with a red gemstone that kept shining with each word the shadowy figure said.

"Then let's keep going."

The smoke creature chuckled, wrapping its dark limbs around the sorcerer and, with a lovingly tone that didn't fit it, it said:

"Yes, master."

—ξ ॐ θ —

Talking was fun. As a performer, he was used to it, since he not only sang, he also told stories and tales, but they were usually about heroes performing mighty acts and slaying dragons, not things like the traditional food of his homeland or the flowers that he liked the most. But alas, there he was, talking to a duck about the most mundane of things. A few moments ago,

he even got to pat that little head, but the duck ran away as if it was flustered, it was really cute.

“So, it’s made of wheat and it’s like a looooong string.” He explained, extending his arms for emphasis. “And then we put tomato sauce, a bit of meat and a bit of oregano... Ah, oregano is a plant, we use the dried leaves to add flavor. You’ve never been outside this forest, have you? There is a lovely village out there, they make really good food too.”

The duck kept its gaze fixated on the man, even when it was still floating in the water; the way it followed Feliciano’s movements was quite funny, it seemed to be really interested in what he was saying... or perhaps he was just assigning human behaviours to an animal. He didn’t have more time to think about it, since he felt a ticklish sensation in his nose.

“Ah... ah... *Achoo!*!” Feliciano sneezed, feeling a chill running down his spine. ”It’s getting cold... I should dress myself, I don’t want to get sick. It would be such a pain!”

Lazily reaching his backpack with his arms, he checked if his clothes were dried and started putting them on, humming the same melody as before, although he didn’t put any shoes since he wanted to feel the grass caress his feet. That is when he noticed the duck seemed... weird.

“Paperella?”

He called out, but the duck didn’t answer with its usual quacks. Instead, he kept swimming in circles while looking at the sky, restless.

“What is it?” Feliciano asked, slowly walking towards the lake, since he didn’t want to freak out the poor bird even more. “Are you scared of the dark, perhaps?”

What a silly question, he thought to himself. How could an animal be scared of the dark? Then again, Paperella seemed to be all alone. Despite seeing many birds, there weren’t any other ducks around. No family to take care of a small baby duck. That thought... made Feliciano’s heart ache.

“How long have you been here all by yourself?” He asked even when he knew he wouldn’t get any answers. The duck just lowered its head, staring at its reflection in the turbulent waters below.

It was like looking in a mirror. A small and helpless creature hiding itself in a dream-like place, away from all the scary things and also its loved ones. Why was Paperella alone? Did it have no mom, no siblings? It was a baby duck, so it must’ve been alive for a short amount of time. What happened here and why did it look so deeply sad? Night was quickly approaching, the sky getting painted with orange and red hues while Feliciano tried his best to calm down the tiny bird, who looked like it wanted to hide.

“Hey, hey. It’s okay. You aren’t alone anymore. I’m right here.” He said in a soft voice, and that somehow seemed to calm the duck’s nerves a bit. Maybe it felt at ease when he spoke? But he ran out of conversation topics...! In situations like this, the best choice was doing something he excelled at.

Feliciano told the small creature to wait for him and retrieved his instrument, walking towards the edge of the lake and sitting. Resting the *ghironda* on his lap, he cleared his throat and put his right hand on the crank and the left hand on the keys, giving Paperella a warm smile.

“Since you’ve been such a good listener, Paperella, I will offer you this song.” He said, playing the first note and extended it to check if it was tuned correctly. The duck swam a bit closer, curious even if it was still nervous judging by the way its feathers had stood up.

“*What is this human going to do?*” its eyes said, as clearly as the water it swam in. After a slight chuckle, Feliciano explained with a nostalgic gleam in his eyes: “Actually, I never learned this song in a proper way; the lyrics are written by me, since I don’t know the proper ones. I heard this melody in a dream, you see, the same dream in which I met the man I fell for and the same dream that pushed me to look for this place. Perhaps this is the lake I saw in it? I’m not sure. I just know that, to find him, I had to find a lake. If this is the place in which he is waiting for me... then maybe he’ll recognize the song... Just a silly hope I have. Don’t mind me.”

The way he laughed hid a tangible sorrow, but since he wanted to cheer up the small duck, he didn’t dwell any further in his fantasies and hopes. Instead, to a wide-eyed Paperella, he began to sing with the sun setting behind him, the golden hour painting the scene as if it was from a fairy tale.

*I know you, I walked with you once upon a dream.*

*I know you, that look in your eyes is so familiar, a gleam,*

*and I know it's true that visions are seldom all they seem...*

*But if I know you, I'll know what you'll do,*

*you'll love me at once, the way you did once upon a dream.*

*Ah, ah, ah...*

*Ah, ah, ah...*

*Mhm, mhm...*

*And you know me too, you'll know what I'll do,*

*I'll fall in your arms, the way I did once upon a dream.*

*You know me, you walked with me once upon a dream.*

*You know me, what I feel when I look at you is more than a gleam,*

*and you know it's true that visions are seldom all they seem...*

*But you know me too, you'll know what I'll do,*

*I'll love you at once, the way I did once upon a dream.*

As he sang the last verse, the moon started to rise and the duck kept looking at him, stunned as if it heard something ridiculous. It started to quack as a duck would do, but this time it sounded desperate, almost scared and... angry? This took him by surprise, stopping in his tracks; he raised the hand that rested on the crank of the *ghironda*, trying to calm Paperella down, but just as the moon's whole round body appeared in the sky, a blinding light started to come out of the lake. He reflexively covered his eyes, the *ghironda* falling to the right side of his leg while he was unable to understand what was going on.

“Paperella? Hey! Are you okay? This light...!” He mumbled and, despite being pretty damn scared at this point, the thought of the small duck falling prey to this strange situation made him act without thinking. With his clothes still on, he jumped into the lake even if it was sparkling as if it was the sun itself and started to swim desperately, searching for the tiny bird with both his hands, sinking them as he moved them around. However, what he touched was... strange. It wasn't a bird nor a piece of kelp. It was sturdy and smooth, almost like the torso of a well-trained knight, not that he could know that since all the knights back home were forbidden from interacting with him. The light began to diminish and with that, Feliciano could finally open his eyes with no fear of being blinded.

He would never be prepared for what he saw.

A tall and blonde man stood in front of him, with features akin to a sculpture made by a master at the craft. His hair fell onto his forehead like wet golden locks and Feliciano had his hands on top of the stranger's torso, who had his lower body covered by water. But it was enough for him to notice he was naked. He would've freaked out about that, but his eyes were fixated on that man's face and his blue eyes, so familiar to him. Even the angry expression he had was something he felt he knew, and the way the blond pushed his hands away in a quick gesture was familiar. And the voice... Wait, voice? That, for some reason, was strange.

“How are you here and how do you know that song?” The man shouted, closing the distance with one step as he grabbed Feliciano's shoulders a bit too aggressively. “Answer me! How do you know that song?”

"I... I heard it in a dream..." Feliciano mumbled, too dumbfounded to think properly and sensing the pain in his shoulders.

"That is impossible, those dreams are...!" He stopped, noticing something; the prince had been touching his torso all this time, a fact that he hadn't realized until now. The stranger was red in the face, either with embarrassment or fury. That shook Feliciano to his core, clumsily stumbling backwards as the cold of the water started to sink into his bones. "You impudent...!"

Feliciano had no words and averted his eyes shyly, unable to think about what to say in this situation. Where did that man come from? Why was he swimming naked so late? But once he breathed again, the most terrifying question popped in his head, robbing him of all the color in his face.

"W-where's Paperella?"

"Huh?"

"Paperella, a little duck... it was swimming here until the light appeared..."

"You..."

The stranger sighed, trying his best to stay calm, although Feliciano didn't realize since he was frantically searching for the duck.

"Answer my question first and I will tell you where that duck is." He said, his blue eyes as cold as two blocks of ice. "How did you manage to get here?"

"I... I just walked here! There was a forest and I saw a light, and..."

"Are you allied with the sorcerer?"

"What?"

"Were you sent by him?"

"What are you talking about...?"

"I am asking the questions here!"

“Eek!”

Hearing someone shout at him like that was a first to Feliciano, who despite being in an hostile environment during his childhood, no one actually bared their fangs at him. As a pampered prince, he was used to kind and flattering words even if they were fake; the anger the stranger felt was so tangible it started to make him dizzy in fear.

“I... I’m just a traveler!” He said, moving away from the other who kept breaking the distance, threatening him with his gaze. “I swear! I don’t know any sorcerers, I just... found this place!”

“Liar! No normal human can find this lake!”

“I’m telling the truth!”

He now was starting to feel his eyes itch, a signal imminent tears, but the blonde man didn’t stop. In fact, he seemed to be getting angrier and angrier with every word Feliciano pronounced. This resulted in a total panic mixed with a deep fear, suffocating the brunette.

“W-where is Paperella? What have you done to it?” Feliciano asked with his trembling voice; even while cowering in fear, the tiny duck was still in his thoughts; the man in front of him was nothing but an evil and scary villain. This, however, seemed to be the wrong move, since the taller man started to tremble in fury. No, it was different from that... he was becoming strange.

“If you do not tell me what your intentions are...”

From out of nowhere, his blonde hair started to darken. To be more precise, black feathers began to sprout from his whole body while he grew bigger and bigger. His fingers started to draw out like claws and sharp, monstrous fangs peeked through the feathers that obscured his face. In a low and bone-chilling growl, his cold breath touched Feliciano’s cheeks in a threat and, as the traveler felt his heart stop like a prey’s once they encountered the hungry predator, he heard the beast speak.

“I will make you spit them out.”

He didn't notice when he started to run or if the monster was even going after him. He only knew he felt a sharp pain in his feet, but he didn't stop running even after the many scratches he endured started to bleed. The lake was long gone and he was now lost in the same forest he escaped from, but it was better than experiencing that deadly terror he would've never thought he would ever experience. The tears fell like rivers from his eyes, the pupils frozen in fear, and he was so out of breath he swore he could die right there. Suddenly, his legs gave out and he fell on his face, the moist dirt covering it, but he still tried to escape even if he had no energy left in any of his limbs. He felt a strong pain in his ankle and he knew he had twisted it.

Extending one arm to try and use a tree as support, he was so deeply terrified he didn't even look behind, the possibility of that monster following him being enough to petrify him in his place. Instead, he hid behind the trunk and sat against it, his heart palpitating in his ears while he felt his lungs working as hard as they could to provide him with air once again, but it was fruitless. He was utterly paralyzed and this newfound sensation was so strong he couldn't take it. Even if he kept repeating in his head he had to escape, his body didn't respond as he wanted to and it just shut down. He felt as if he was dying, becoming a corpse in real time and giving it to the most gut-wrenching fear he'd ever experienced, he couldn't breathe and it was like the darkness was engulfing him, but that would've been better to him, since that meant the monster wouldn't find him. That was the exact moment when the realization hit him like cold water.

He could've died, ripped apart by that beast and no one would have known. His brother would never know, the kingdom he owed a duty to would be ignorant of this fact and they would always wonder what happened to him. Alone, miserable and forgotten, that could've been his fate. That thought almost made him throw up right there, the near-death experience shaking his whole world, but then...

He heard laughs. Soft and high-pitched laughs, the same he heard before.

The tears wouldn't stop as the fear finally made him pass out.

## Chapter End Notes

\* Giselle is a French-Italian ballet about the tragic story of a young peasant girl named Giselle and a disguised nobleman named Albrecht, where she dies of heartbreak once he

unknowingly tricks her. Or knowingly, it's a bit complicated. She becomes a Wilis, ghosts of unmarried women who died after being betrayed by their lovers and take revenge in the night by dancing men to death. It's quite pretty, you should check it out!

\* I used plums since the German plum cake (Zwetschgenkuchen or Pflaumenkuchen) is quite popular, and it references the Sugarplum Fairy from the Nutcracker.

\* The streusel is a crumbly topping of flour, butter, and sugar that is baked on top of muffins, breads, pies, and cakes.

# Pas de deux for Two Merry-makers

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When he opened his eyes again, he felt a cold sensation on his ankle. A bit uncomfortable but refreshing at the same time, it seemed to be a strange ointment spreading on his skin. Feeling feverish, Feliciano tried to accommodate himself, but his whole body was sore and heavy and suddenly, he heard a feminine voice next to his ear and a gentle gleam caressed his cheeks, brightening the night in that forest.

“Don’t move!”

Huh? Did he hit his head? He was seeing things...

A small woman, barely the length of his right hand, held some unknown herbs on her tiny hands, her brown wavy hair falling on her shoulders like a waterfall as a warm glow emanated from her whole body. She wore a beautiful tulip, tucked behind her sharp ears while her wings fluttered, keeping her steady in the air... wait, sharp ears? Wings?

“You had such a nasty fall, it must’ve hurt a lot.”

The creature smiled gently, doing her best to convince Feliciano she wasn’t going to hurt him, but the man was too stunned to even react. The dress she wore danced with every movement she made, the skirt made of actual petals sewed together in what was a beautiful flower gown, with a leaf wrapped around her waist as if it was an apron.

“Ah... this must be a dream.” He mumbled, thinking he must’ve still passed out in the forest. This was a different dream from usual, but he still decided to act like he usually did. And so, sitting slowly, he raised one hand towards the little woman, smiling at her. “How cute! Are you a fairy?”

The creature tilted her head slightly, looking a bit confused when the human kept repeating to himself it was a dream, but since she had a tactful and gentle personality, she just went with

it.

"Yes, I'm Elizabeta, the Tulip fairy." She introduced herself, offering a bow while she raised the sides of her flower skirt. "You must've been so scared... We found you lying down here so we took care of you."

"We?"

Just as he said that, many other glowing spheres started surrounding Feliciano, blinding him for a few seconds in which he closed his eyes. Many voices spoke at the same time, bickering.

"I was not taking care of you. That is unbecoming of a fairy, I am no idiot!" A male voice said angrily.

"Oh, Roderich. You don't have to speak so bluntly!"

"I know, Eliza, he's, like, so unnecessarily mean! Just dump him already."

"Shush, Feliks. I'm not dumping anyone."

"But he's sooooo boring..."

"You two realize I'm still here, right?"

Two other fairies had appeared in front of him. The one who seemed annoyed had brown hair and a stern expression, hidden behind miniature glasses; his clothes were made of white flowers, neatly tucking the shirt made of spider silk inside leaf trousers and fixing the edelweiss flower that rested on his chest.

"Don't you idiots understand this is a human we are dealing with?" Roderich said, his cheeks flushing in anger as his insect wings rested behind him, since flying was too much of a chore. He preferred to sit on the many flowers around them instead. "Humans are vicious beings! What if he harms us or the forest?"

"We heard you already! Can't you, like, lower it down a bit? My ears hurt. Right, Tolys? ... Tolys? Ugh, where did he go?" The other one said. He had beautiful blonde hair brushing his shoulders, a bratty and arrogant smile on his lips and he wore flowery puffy shorts. With red poppies embroidered throughout his shirt, his wings fluttered proudly until he noticed the human was staring directly at him, to which he shied away, hiding behind the female fairy. "He... He's looking at me. Eliza, do something!"

It was such a weird dream, it felt too real and the small fairies had moved as if they were people. Just tiny and winged.

"It's okay, Feliks. He's not a bad human."

"How do you know that?" Both fairies asked, looking at Feliciano in suspicion.

The human in question still didn't answer, since he was trying to understand what was happening.

"I won't hurt you! I'm just a traveler, I don't mean any harm." He tried to explain, flustered.

"Just-A-Traveler... what weird names humans have!" The blonde fairy said, laughing out loud but still hiding behind his friend. "I'm Feliks, the Poppy fairy and the prettiest of them all. You were totally scared, weren't you? Can't blame you! Ludwig is, like, so scary. He always looks like this."

And he made an angry face, pouting his lips while Elizabeta let out a snort, which she quickly hid behind her right hand, peeking towards Roderich, but he seemed uninterested in the whole human affair.

"Now, Feliks, you don't have to be so mean."

"But you laughed! I totes saw you laugh."

"I didn't!"

Were those really fairies? The pain he still felt throughout his body was real and when he pinched his arm, he didn't wake up, so this was... real, though after seeing a monster, chatting with fairies was like heaven.

"Uhm... excuse me, I brought the herbs you asked for, Elizabeta... Ah! The human woke up!" A fourth voice spoke, belonging to a fairy with brown hair and a worried face, as if he had to take care of all his friends all the time. Flying towards them, in his hands he held many herbs, the same ones Elizabeta had but in larger quantities to the point his face was mostly covered by them. Just like Feliks, he wore a matching shirt made of spider silk, embroidered with yellow flowers, but he also had brown and sturdy leafs that replaced gloves and boots. He was about to speak with Feliciano, but the blonde fairy had thrown himself towards his direction, causing some of the herbs to fall. At the same time, the glow around him started to become slightly pink. "Hello, Feliks."

"Tolys! Where were you? I waited for, like, a century!"

"I've been gone for ten minutes, actually..."

"It doesn't matter!"

"Hehe... Feliks, you really missed Tolys, didn't you?"

"Ughh, shut up, Eliza! It's not what you're thinking, okay?"

"Mhm, sure, I believe you..."

"What's with that smile? You're being mean!"

"Feliks, don't fight with Eliza, please."

"Why are you taking her side? You meanie-head!"

"I'm not taking anyone's side!"

And it was chaos, seeing them argue amongst themselves made it clear fairies were very similar to humans, although their arguments sounded almost like little bells clashing against each other. However, Feliciano still was very lost and, despite his best attempts at speaking, he was overshadowed by their argument. That is, until the fairy with glasses clicked his tongue and, elevating himself higher than his companions at a fast flying speed, announced:

"Now, you foolish fools!" He said that twice. "It wasn't my idea to help this human, but yours, ignoring him is just bad manners. It is so unbecoming!"

Elizabeta blushed slightly and cleared her throat, patting Feliks head in a gesture that finished the childish discussion. Her wings started to get too tired, so she decided to go rest alongside Roderich. Once Feliciano looked closely, one of her wings was shorter than the other, a straight scar running across its transparent membrane revealing it had healed just barely, leaving her almost flightless save for some short flutters.

"Roderich is right. I apologize, human. Let's start from the beginning, shall we?"

Feliciano nodded and extended a hand... finger, unable to contain the chuckles at this absurd yet endearing situation.

"My name is Feliciano, I'm a traveler from far away. It's nice to meet you."

"I'm Elizabeta, the Tulip fairy." She introduced herself once again, holding the man's finger with both her hands in a polite greeting, although it seemed stiff, like being a lady wasn't that natural for her. "I am in charge most of the time, since they are always arguing and never get things done. Now, boys, please introduce yourselves."

"But I already did it... whatevs, I'm Feliks! The Poppy fairy and a totally amazing seamster! I made aaaall the pretty clothes we wear, aren't they, like, the cutest? I like pretty clothes and animals, and I also find humans very funny." The blonde fairy laughed out loud, feeling a bit more comfortable once the human had introduced himself, although he didn't get any closer since both his friends were there to protect him.

"That is a lie, I made most of our clothes. Feliks just helped me collect the material." The fairy in glasses sighed, as if this was a common occurrence. "I'm Roderich, the Edelweiss fairy. Do I have to say something about myself? Uh... I like music, I suppose."

"Ah, I also like music!" Feliciano said, but then he remembered he left all his stuff back at the lake and... ah, that was heartbreaking. His dear instrument would never be retrieved again... He looked at the fairies in front of him and spoke with the fourth fairy, a worried look in his face. "I-is there a way I can return to grab my things I left behind? You were... Tolys, right?"

"My name is Tolys and I'm the Rue fairy. I mostly make sure none of us gets hurt... and I suppose it now includes you." Tolys laughed, although he did seem very tired. He fluttered towards Feliciano's legs, being careful to not make him uncomfortable and placed the herbs he brought on top of the injured zone. "You can't walk since you twisted your ankle. I did my best to heal you, this ointment is imbued with magic so it should do the trick. Um, allow me."

Feliciano nodded, still a bit surprised from before, but he considered that such a small being wouldn't hurt him. Once Tolys left the herbs on the twisted ankle, he pressed them onto the skin with both his hands and a faint golden light began to come out of them. Feliciano felt a small and short pain, like a warm energy extending throughout his whole body starting from his ankle. Was this... magic? Feliciano had accepted everything since he had no other options, but seeing and feeling this other world was making him realize this was happening. This was real. The beings surrounding him were sentient, overflowing with an energy he only read in storybooks and legends. So that meant... the monstrous beast was also real, and that lake was the home of all those creatures.

"There we go! It's not completely healed, but I think it will allow you to get back on your feet."

"Yay! Tolys is, like, so cool, isn't he? He learned everything from me!"

"T-that isn't true."

"Stop it, you lovebirds. It's embarrassing."

"Jeez, Eliza! Don't say those things!"

They started to argue and laugh again while Feliciano tried to digest everything going on, looking at his ankle covered with ointment as if it wasn't his. The fairies chatting started to become background noise and the fever only increased as the minutes flew by, with his wet and dirty clothes and all those emotions a pampered prince wasn't prepared for. It seemed that healing magic only worked on external injuries, and despite his head being clear, he was still under the effects of the fever. The only one to notice this was Roderich, who, annoyed, landed his two feet on top of Feliciano's head and shouted:

"Will you stop your chit chat already? Can't you see that the human is still unwell? You ought to cherish him!" He said although he was using that same human as a stage.

"I... I apologize. It's just that I feel so comfortable around Feliciano, I don't know why." Elizabeta mumbled, her cheeks red.

"I agree with Elizabeta. Somehow, he doesn't seem like a bad human."

"Yeah! He's a much better human than the one we have, I like him a lot more."

Another human? Feliciano felt a bit hopeful, but the only other person he saw became a scary beast, so maybe they were referring to another one.

"Ugh, just how foolish you people can be? I am not talking about that!" Roderich fixed his glasses, exasperated. "Think about this for more than a second, will you? A human entered this forest and reached the lake even when no regular human could. What do you think it means?"

"... That he's kinda cool?" Feliks said, only to get scolded by Elizabeta, who had become quite pale herself once she heard the Edelweiss fairy.

"No, you dummy! Remember what Arthur said all those years ago?" She whispered, with a gesture indicating for them to get closer. Murmuring amongst themselves, the only words Feliciano could hear between the bells tinkling were "curse" and "pure soul."

"Uhm... can you tell me too? I'm still very confused." Feliciano mumbled, but once he spoke, the fairies all looked at him. Elizabeta smiled softly and had some faint tears in her eyes that looked like pearls, Roderich had a deep frown and an annoyed expression, Tolys was very surprised and Feliks seemed uninterested.

Elizabeta wiped some of her tears with her right hand, fluttering her wings to grab Feliciano's fingers, holding them as tightly as her small body allowed. This, for some reason, gave him a bad feeling, which was confirmed once he heard her.

"You are here to break the curse!"

“We should go and see how they are doing.”

“Ugh, not a chance! I don’t want to get closer to a stinky human, what if their smell sticks to my clothes?”

“My, Chiara, you would be pretty even if you smelled bad!”

“That’s not what I want to hear!”

“Mhm... And I want to hear silence, for a bit, can you guys do that for me?”

“E-eek...”

Back at the lake, three fairies were sitting around the things the human left behind, chatting amongst themselves in the dark, although their bodies provided enough light for them to see each other. One of them had shoulder-length hair and a headband made of a flower’s green stem with a beautiful lily decorating it. A small curl popped out of her head through the right and she seemed to be annoyed, although the presence of a tall and pale fairy near her was making her uncomfortable.

“You can’t make me shut up, Anya!” She shouted, stepping on the crank of the *ghironda* in an attempt to make herself look bigger. “I will use this weird human tool against you if you try to.”

Anya, with her long and beige colored hair, just giggled under her right hand, her long silk dress decorated with chamomile flowers sewn onto it and some fluffy white pom poms covering her neck and as a little hat. Her wings rested behind her in a relaxed manner, which only made the other two grow more uneasy.

“Is that so? I’m pretty sure I can.”

“Jeez, stop fighting, you two! I won’t allow it, we need to get going soon and we’ll be late if you keep bickering like that!”

“We’re not fighting, Isabel. Chiara and I are the best of friends, aren’t we?”

“We aren’t! And I’m not going there, I can’t stand any of them.”

Isabel, the Carnation fairy, fixed her hair bun like a tired mother and shook her head, staying firm. Resting her hands on her hips, the red color of her tight dress made her stand out way

too much against the endless green of the grass, but nothing like her loud and confident voice. Despite her claims, she was smiling widely and carefree, a testament of her laid-back personality when it wasn't about her sisters.

“We'll go and that is final!”

Both Anya and Chiara sighed, knowing arguing with Isabel was like talking to a tree trunk, a waste of time. The Chamomile fairy, despite being feared by most of her sisters, was quite peaceful and didn't mean any actual harm, so she prepared to just go with the flow while Chiara kept making a fuss, however, their conversation was interrupted by heavy, dark clouds settling on top of the lake, ominously roaring. A sudden thunder made the three of them jump and in a reflex their wings prepared for flight and running away.

“I-its... It's Ludwig!” Chiara muttered, pale in the face. “He's angry... He hasn't been this angry for years... Isabel! What do we do?”

Isabel looked at the Lily fairy nervously. Since they arrived late due to a party they were preparing, none of them actually knew what happened. They only heard about a human who managed to enter the lake, and since the monster hadn't said anything, they assumed he didn't know either. However, by the looks of it, his anger was just as late as they were.

“First of all, we need to tell the others about it. If it rains, our wings will become useless and we still have a lot of time until dawn.” Isabel said, stern. “Chiara, you are the fastest of us, so you will go and tell Elizabeta and the others. Anya, prepare the shelters!”

Anya nodded, her soft smile vanishing, but Chiara wasn't convinced. Trembling from head to toe, she shook her head.

“H-huh? Me, alone? I can fight just fine, but a-alone?”

“You can do it, Chiara! I believe in you!”

“That just makes it worse...!”

“Chiara, if you don't, everyone will die. Are you alright with that?”

“A-Any...! You can’t just tell her that!

“But it’s the truth! Maybe.”

They spent some more minutes arguing like this, but the moment a single drop of water fell on top of Isabel’s head, they all froze in place. Her hair was a mess now, but thankfully her wings were intact for now.

“Gosh, just do it! I will take care of the human’s belongings, if there is something useful among his things we can’t just let it get wet--”

Isabel stopped in her tracks, her voice disappearing like a breeze against a strong wind and grabbed both her friends and flew as fast as she could, hiding amongs the bushes and grass. From the lake behind them, a monstrous creature with black feathers arose, a threatening growl abandoning its throat. It didn’t seem to notice the fairies, since he just walked past them and stared at the things the human had left behind. Extending one claw, it touched the *ghironda* with curiosity, attempting to press the keys but once it noticed its fingers were far too big, it just grunted.

Its attention then shifted to a handkerchief covering a slice of plum cake and it sniffed it, attempting to eat the piece but it heard something that made it look up, its blue eyes glowing like two menacing sapphires.

Chiara had covered her mouth with both her hands, hiding herself amongst Isabel’s arms while Anya stared blankly at the beast from the bushes. Their glow was faint, since they were doing their best to remain hidden, but a monster’s senses were far too powerful to trick for more than a few minutes. However, its interest seemed to lay on something inside the forest, not the three fragile beings who could be crushed under its foot as easily as grass.

With its jaws, it took the backpack and the instrument and tucked into his feathers, heavy steps guiding him towards one of the sturdiest and tallest trees of the place. And then, it did something strange; leaving them hidden against the trunk, it started to pluck its feathers one by one, growls of pain and annoyance making the fairies tremble.

“What is he doing...?”

"Shush, Chiara."

"B-but look, he's..."

"Protecting the human's belongings?"

Just as Anya pronounced in a whisper, the feathers were used as a means of protecting the instrument from rain and wind. As an aquatic bird, its feathers would not allow any water to pass through. How? Ludwig, when transformed to this point, had little to no rational thinking, although he had become this beast just three times in fifty years, so none of them actually knew much about it. They saw how the beast whined slightly and pushed its snout towards the *ghironda*, like it wanted to hear it, but after a few seconds it looked into the forest one last time before extending its long, black wings and lifting itself off the ground.

"We didn't get to tell them..." Chiara lamented, her voice cracking.

Isabel hugged the Lily fairy tightly, comforting her as another drop of water fell nearby. Anya stared at the void, deep in thought.

"It will be okay, Chiara. Elizabeta will know what to do. For now... let's prepare the shelter."

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"So, l-let me get this straight." Feliciano said. "That man I saw is under a spell, and becomes a monster because of the curse... and you guys are trapped here because of that same curse?"

Elizabeta nodded, a wide smile in her lips once the human understood so easily.

"That's impossible...! Uhm, it might be, since you are... well... fairies." He sighed, feeling his head ache and the fever not helping. "So the Swan King fairy tale was real?"

"Swan King... Mhm, I haven't heard anyone refer to him like that in a long time! It's a pretty nickname, but he hates it, so be sure to never use it in front of him."

"I won't be in front of him, I'm leaving!"

"The lake used to be so beautiful and brimming with life, once the curse is lifted I will... H-huh?! Why?!"

"Because I want to live!"

Elizabeta stared at Feliciano in astonishment and quickly flew to his side.

"B-but... Only you can lift the curse!"

"Why only me? There are plenty of humans, stronger and smarter than me!"

"But none of them made it to the lake, only you!"

"Well, m-maybe someone will come after me."

"That won't do! If we wait any longer, I will go crazy! Come oooon, it's about damn time someone takes the monster away from this forest!"

"Elizabeta, please, behave yourself." Roderich sighed, taking Elizabeta's hand and pulling her away from the prince, to whom he gave a chilling glare. "I told you. We can't trust humans, they are selfish and only care about themselves."

The female fairy pressed her lips together, anxiously looking at both human and fairies. Feliks and Tolys had been arguing about the same thing, albeit a bit louder.

"Why even bother? Humans are, like, so weak, even if you heal him now, he'll totally get hurt again and die!"

"Feliks, don't say those things... Even if you don't like humans, they are living beings just like you and me."

"So what? He isn't gonna help us! Don't waste your magic on him! Just use it to play with me, alright?"

"I can't do that, I have responsibilities."

"Ughh, you are so lame!"

The glowing and fluttering started to make Feliciano feel dizzy, and with his feverish and weak body, that meant he could only close his eyes to make sure the world didn't spin. All this information and new responsibility was too much, he never asked for it! He just wanted to see the lake and maybe find *him*, and now he was entangled in a fantasy story.

"I'll just go back, I'll tell the villagers and..."

"You can't do that!" Roderich shouted. "The lake is already weak as it is, if more humans try to enter it, it will become so contaminated that not even ducks will survive!"

Ducks... ah, ducks, he still hadn't heard what happened to Paperella, but he felt too weak to even ask.

"When the sorcerer left to search a for a cure for the lake, we lost most of our powers, so we would be unable to defend ourselves or the lake." Elizabeta explained with a grim expression. "And Ludwig... he might look scary and angry and dangerous, but he's just... he's just a kid. We had each other to keep us company, since fairies live in colonies, but he has been all alone for fifty years now. I hoped that once a human stumbled into the lake, the curse would break and everyone would be happy again, like when things were right."

Roderich placed a hand on her waist, offering comfort while his right wing covered her lovingly.

If Ludwig was that beast that threatened him, he didn't want to get involved, he was far too scary! But then again... For some reason, the Tulip fairy seemed to have a soft spot for the beast, unlike all the other fairies who held nothing but fear and contempt for him. Roderich didn't say anything, he only gave her a look of understanding. What was missing from the fairy tale? Why did he really get cursed? And why did he seem to drown in such deep sorrow? Despite being scared out of his mind, Feliciano was still an expert at reading people. Instead of hatred or murderous intent, what he saw in the blue eyes of that man was just despair and loneliness.

"Please, Feliciano. Help him."

Elizabeta's tears clouded her eyes, begging for a knight in shining armor that could rescue the whole enchanted forest, to save the fairies, the cursed man and the small duck that looked at him with sad, blue eyes.

But Feliciano wasn't a knight in shining armor.

He could never be.

He was cowardly, selfish and weak, always running away from reality to drown himself in his dreams. He could never save anyone, he couldn't even save himself. He wanted to apologize to Elizabeta for not being what she hoped for and he wanted to apologize to Roderich for being exactly what he hated about humans, but the fever had taken over his whole body. All he could think about were all his errors and shortcomings. When his people needed him, he hid himself in the castle. When his brother needed him, he left to chase after a illusion. And now, when someone else needed him, he wanted to leave and disappear again.

How disgusting he was.

"Feliciano...? Hey, are you alright?" Elizabeta asked once she noticed he wasn't speaking. "H-hey, he's burning up! Is this normal?"

The Rue fairy hurriedly flew towards them, leaving Feliks annoyed and kinda worried.

"This... w-what is this? Ah, I know! It's a fever, it's really dangerous if not treated...!"

"Then what are you waiting for, you idiot? Treat him!"

"I w-wish I could, Roderich, but I don't have enough magic power...! Fifty years ago I could have treated it, but..."

"Feliciano! Wake up! Agh, what do we do? We don't know anything about humans, if only Giselle was here..."

They were, of course, arguing, but the loud and panicked voice of Feliks made them stop to look at him. He was flying like a hummingbird, hurriedly and nervously while he grabbed Tolys' shirt, tucking it.

"H-hey! It's gonna, uh, totally rain? We should get out of here!"

"What? Rain?"

"Yeah, I can totes smell it! It seems... L-Ludwig is coming!"

"Huh? How can you know?"

"I can smell it, you dumb-dumb!"

"That doesn't make any sense! What are you, a dog?"

"Rod, I will rip your ugly hair and glasses off, like, right now if you don't move your butt!"

Just then, a rowdy thunder sent shivers to their spines while many drops of water started to fall through the tree leaves. The first casualty was Roderich, whose wings became wet after rain slipped through the leaf he was standing under.

"Roderich!" Elizabeta shouted and flew towards him, but her cries were drowned by a low and terrifying growl.

Without thinking Feliks grabbed Tolys and yanked him away and flying as far as they could.

"We'll meet you at the shelter, Eliza!" The blonde shouted, hand in hand with the Rue fairy who was trembling from head to toe.

Elizabeta nodded and helped Roderich stand up, but he couldn't fly anymore. Not that they would, since once a big and dark paw stepped right in front of them, they knew they couldn't escape without attracting attention to themselves.

"F-Feliciano...!" She whispered, but the Edelweiss fairy hugged her and led her away.

"We'll go on foot. Let's go, Eliza."

"B-but..."

"We cannot risk ourselves! We don't stand a chance against him, we'll only have more casualties. Please, Eliza. I know you hold pride in your fighting skills, but you always choose your enemies so carelessly..." He mumbled that last sentence, his eyes inevitably landing on her left wing. The scarred one. Elizabeta just lowered her head, fighting back the tears, and nodded, unable to look at the scene. Then, they disappeared among the grass and flowers, leaving Feliciano's unconscious body behind, victim to both rain and beast.

The monster stared at the prince. Breathing with difficulty, his face was reddened and the sweat was cleared by the few drops of rain that slipped through the dense forest leaves. Sniffing him, the cursed being noticed that he was starting to become dangerously cold to its touch and it felt its heart stop for a few seconds, staring right at the helpless human before it spread its wings on top of him, its monstrous body becoming smaller and smaller. With its torn and rough vocal cords, it started to hum a song. The same one it heard in its dreams, sung by a stranger it met there.

The monster's feather faded as a man took its place, carrying the prince towards the lake while he hummed the melody they both knew.

## Chapter End Notes

We saw some fairies appear! Some of them are Nyo! for practical and preference reasons, so I hope it's not too much of a bother. m(\_ \_)m The most important ones are those who have dances in the original Swan Lake. In this world, fairies hold titles regarding the flower that birthed them, and for each country is their national flower! Also, they call themselves sisters and brothers, but they aren't actually related since they are born from flowers... and it was such a shock when I read that Russia's national flower isn't the sunflower! Also, also, I took the liberty of making Elizabeta and Feliks besties, since the series itself doesn't show it but Hungary-Polish friendship is a big thing IRL. We need more of them.

We'll see more fairies in the future, so stay tuned! (◦•◡•)✧ Maybe on my Twitter I will post sketches of their designs, but I won't promise anything.

# Dance with Goblets

## Chapter Notes

I was recently introduced to Ensemble Stars by the same friend I watched Hetalia with, and, oh, boy... just know that Valkyrie and Itsuki Shu have stolen my heart. It's really good, since their songs have the exact fairy-tale vibes I like and writing has become somehow even better to me. 10/10 would recommend. (‘• ω •’) ♡

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

A memory, but whose?

Sitting on a gorgeous and intrinsically decorated couch, a young prince kept his blue eyes fixated on a storybook. At his side, his elder brother read it to him, his voice calm and as full of energy and dramatism as ever. The young prince's blonde hair fell on his eyebrows softly while he played with the ends of his shirt, the sleepwear made of the finest silk. He kept clinging to his brother, a gallant young man of silver hair and red eyes and, despite looking incredibly mentally exhausted, he had a gentle expression. He wasn't wearing his crown, but every single one of his movements screamed he was the crown prince; confidence and elegance mixed in a perfect individual, but right now, he was just a big brother. Not the man who had to wield a sword to defend the kingdom and not the man who would inherit the heavy burden on his shoulders.

"... And so, everytime the Fairy Prince would sing, pearls and diamonds would fall from his mouth, enamoring everyone who laid eyes upon him, his long, long hair falling gracefully on his back." The man said, reading his young brother his favorite fairy tale. The small boy was paying total attention despite having heard that same fairy tale millions of times before. "However, a hideous and selfish monster..."

"Big *bruder*, what does hideous mean? I've never asked before."

"Mhm... it means something is really, really ugly."

"Like a toad?"

"No, toads are important animals, just because they are ugly doesn't mean they are hideous. A hideous monster is more like..." The elder brother stopped for a few moments, tapping the

book pages with a gloved finger as he searched for the right words. "Ugly both inside and outside."

The small boy blinked twice, understanding and thinking of a comparison, but he didn't say it out loud, he just pondered. "*So... war is hideous.*" It made mother sad, it made father angry and it forced big brother to leave for a prolonged time, fighting against it. His childish and naive head couldn't wrap itself around the concept of war, so he just imagined it as a monster. A hideous monster, then. Pressing his lips together in pout, he nodded to himself.

That gesture made the eldest laugh and caress his head, the cuteness of his baby brother being too much for a mere man to handle.

"Oh..."

"Shall I continue, Lutz?"

"Yes, please."

"Well, then..." He cleared his throat, coughing softly while looking at Ludwig, who kept staring at the book. "However, a hideous and selfish monster became infatuated with the Fairy Prince and asked for his hand in marriage, but the Fairy Prince knew the monster was evil and cruel, so he rejected it. Furious, the monster kidnapped the prince and flew far away from the kingdom, hiding him in a tall and narrow tower with no way out except through the window. 'Thou shalt become mine or thou shalt never escape!' the beast shouted."

That made the blonde boy giggle, since his brother lowered his voice as if he was the monster itself and deciding to tickle his sides like an attack, something the youngest had to defend himself from via pushing him away in laughter. He always became as engrossed as Ludwig in these stories, after all.

"But the prince rejected it once again. The monster, infuriated, chained the prince to the tower and left. The Fairy Prince could only look through the window, unable to escape and feeling melancholic... melancholic means he's sad."

"I know, *bruder!*"

"Just making sure." He chuckled, the youngest having climbed to rest on his brother's lap so he could see the pictures more clearly. A crying Fairy Prince was drawn on the book, looking

through the window while pearls and diamonds fell to the ground all the way down. "Unable to contain his pain, the Fairy Prince started to sing, the diamonds falling like frozen water drops in a deeply sorrowful song, capable of breaking the heart of anyone who heard him, but in the hidden tower, there was no one around to listen."

Ludwig felt sad for the Fairy Prince, imagining him all alone in a tall tower with no one to hear him cry or sing.

"Just then, a brave knight riding his white horse heard the most beautiful and heartbreaksing song he'd ever heard and, following the melody, he stumbled across the tall tower. With pearls falling to his head, the knight looked up and fell in love with the singing fairy, promising to free him. The monster was jealous though, so once it saw the Fairy Prince talking to the knight, it attacked. However, the knight was powerful and strong, so he fended off the beast's blows and, after a long battle, he slayed it with his brilliant sword. But how would he climb the tower and rescue his love? The Fairy Prince was smart and he let his long hair fall through the window, allowing the knight to use it to reach him. Once they were reunited, the knight broke the Fairy Prince's shackles and they embraced each other all night long..."

"*Bruder*, what does embrace mean?"

"... It's like, uh, a really big hug! Only between you and the person you love." The eldest averted his eyes, not sure about how to approach this, so he chose the safest option. "Ahem. The knight asked for the Fairy Prince's hand and he, knowing the knight was pure of heart, accepted. Singing only songs of love, they got married and lived happily ever after, pearls and diamonds falling like a path behind them. The end."

Ludwig smiled, satisfied, and his elder brother laughed out loud, patting his head.

"You really like that story, huh, Lutz?"

"Yes. I really like the Fairy Prince and the knight, but I hate the monster. It was mean." The blonde boy shook his head, disapproving of the selfish beast. "The knight is like you, *bruder*. Brave and strong and good... I want to be just like him when I grow up."

And by extension, he wanted to be like his brother. This made the red eyed man smile softly, but there was a certain sadness hidden in his eyes that made the expression seem troubled.

Not that Ludwig noticed. He was far too young to understand the subtleties of human emotions.

"You'll be a great knight, Lutz. I know it." He placed a hand on the boy's forehead, checking his temperature. "Your fever went down, thankfully. It seems you were right, reading fairy tales on the couch makes you heal faster than staying in bed."

How could it not? If it was his brother who narrated them.

"But now, you have to go to bed, alright? It's really late and you need to sleep."

"But... but..." Lutz stuttered, unable to pronounce what he really wanted to say. He didn't want his brother to go away, he wanted to keep playing and talking!

The silver haired man seemed to understand, though, since he just sighed with a smile and carried the youngest to the bed.

"Tomorrow, when you get better, we'll go play outside. I can even ask father if he lets us go to the enchanted lake. How does that sound?"

"...! R-really? The lake you always tell me about?" The boy asked, his bright eyes sparkling with great excitement.

"That one, exactly. How does that sound? Good, right? But if you don't sleep, you won't heal completely and we won't be able to go, so..."

"I'll sleep, I'll sleep!"

With the speed of a falcon, Ludwig fixed the expensive and soft bed sheets and covered himself with them, the possibility of visiting the place his brother told him about being enough to push the capricious nature of a kid away. Receiving the storybook with both his hands, he placed it under his pillow and giggled. He wanted to say another thing, how much he loved his brother and how happy he was when he was around, but the firm knocks on his bedroom door made him jump slightly.

"Prince Gilbert." Someone said behind the door and after getting authorization, he entered.

The voice belonged to one of the generals of the army, deep and stern, like he was reprimanding the prince who, in turn, stared at the intruder. With a long mustache that outlines his lips, the general gave Ludwig a cryptic look. All the gentleness and kindness vanished from his brother's expression, leaving behind coldness akin to ice. This made Ludwig tremble slightly, but Gilbert gave him a weak smile to assure him everything was fine.

"Let's speak outside." He ordered. Then, he turned around to stare at Ludwig, tucked in his bed with a worried look on his face. The man patted his baby brother, brushing his blonde hair in a loving gesture a mother would do. But their own mother never did that, so it was something Gilbert decided was his responsibility. "I'll leave now, Lutz. Be sure to not stay awake for too long, alright?"

And he stood up, walking towards the door while the general followed. They didn't close it though, so after a minute, Ludwig stealthily left his bed and tiptoed towards it, hiding his mouth in his hands in an attempt to keep his breathing as low as possible. He peeked through and observed in silence, feeling his stomach sink. His brother was so scary to look at to the point the even serious-looking mustache man looked down in his presence, both because of his status and his reputation in the battlefield.

"What is it, Lieutenant?" Gilbert asked, clear and menacing.

"The barbarians..." The general stuttered. "They have crossed the border. The king has requested your presence back at the frontline."

Barbarians. War. The frontline.

This declaration made Gilbert lose his already low patience, shouting too loudly for his little brother, who took a step back, scared.

"But I just got back home! After months of fighting in the frontlines and barely a week here, he asks me to go back? What is father thinking? Everything would be resolved if he decided to use diplomacy for once!"

Ludwig frowned, his breathing becoming irregular. His brother was leaving? Just like he said, Ludwig had waited for months for his only loving family to return from "war". That hideous monster. But now he was leaving again?

He didn't want that. Was the trip to the lake a lie? Why did his brother tell him he was going to stay with him when he couldn't? Why did he leave him behind again? Why?

The man of the mustache lowered his head even further, but after a second in which Gilbert kept muttering to himself way too low for Ludwig to hear, the Lieutenant looked directly at the silver-haired prince with a pained but determined expression on his face.

"Please, Your Highness, the magic those barbarians wield is far too powerful for us to deal with. We need you."

But Ludwig also needed him. Why couldn't someone else fight the war? Why did it have to be his big brother? Why was magic something he had to fight against?

That last sentence made Gilbert stop right there, but because his back was facing the door, Ludwig couldn't read his expression. In a heavy silence, the blonde prince felt his temperature rise, tears clouding his eyes as he heard his brother speak.

"Tell the servants to prepare my luggage immediately. We'll depart in the morning when the first bird sings."

"Yes, Your Highness."

A military salute and a crying boy covering his eyes on opposite sides of the door. Ludwig stumbled towards his bed and hid himself in it, sobbing as quietly as he could while he heard his brother's footsteps become fainter and fainter. Why did the outside world always take Gilbert away? And why was everyone else more important than him? An abandoned boy cried himself to sleep, hugging the storybook with all the might he could as he found comfort in it. Even if everyone left him for an ugly and hideous world, the fairy tales would retain their beauty. They would always be there for him. That was all he could count on when the adults kept looking away from him.

This memory wasn't his, he was sure of it, but once Feliciano woke up, he couldn't remember anything from it. He just knew he dreamed of someone else's memories somehow.

Slowly opening his eyes, a cool and refreshing sensation covered his forehead and, touching it with his fingers, he noticed it was Gisela's handkerchief, clean and dripped with cold water to help with his fever. With the handkerchief on his hands, he then noticed he was laying on top of a patch of grass next to the lake and with his ankle bandaged, albeit a bit clumsily while the moon was still high in the sky, revealing it hasn't been long. How? He remembered passing out in the woods, surrounded by fairies while it rained... Trying to sit, he let out a sigh of relief; surprisingly, his body didn't hurt. In fact, he felt like all his exhaustion and long-term pain had vanished. The moist flowers around him were somehow pressing against his body and faintly glowing, their petals touching him like a kiss. Each part of his skin that was kissed felt refreshed and nice, but he couldn't quite understand how. Not that he understood how the flowers moved and why they glowed, but he thanked them internally since thanks to them he could see. With the moon reflecting on the water, it was a magical sight.

"You are awake." A masculine and deep voice said, startling Feliciano. It was the same man that had appeared in the water, although he was wearing clothes now. A simple white shirt and black pants, he was kneeling some meters away, collecting some of the same flowers that Feliciano had near, but his gesture held an elegance and dignity befitting of a king. Even if that scene was a bit funny taking in account how manly the individual was, Feliciano still remembered the way he transformed into a winged beast, so he couldn't help but tense up, fear reflecting in his eyes. The stranger pressed his lips together, almost like a pout, and he brushed his blonde hair with his fingers nervously, his strong accent making him seem angry when in reality he was apologetically mumbling. "I am sorry for scaring you, I did not mean to do it."

Anyone would be scared of this tough and angry-looking man, but as stated previously, the brunet knew how to read people. Staring at the other with an intense gaze, searching and examining, Feliciano tried to search for any hostility, but he didn't find any. It was just... a clumsy apology.

"Did you bandage me?" He asked, looking at his ankle. He could see that under the bandage, there was a strange ointment, likely the same one the Rue fairy used but in larger quantities.

The stranger nodded, clutching the flowers in his hands.

“I see...” Feliciano touched the injured zone, but it didn’t hurt. It was a bit uncomfortable, but he probably could walk. “Thank you.”

He thanked him, smiling softly and timidly since he didn’t know what else to say. This was... the same monster as before, right? But he was so different! For a moment, Feliciano considered he was just insane and imagined everything, but if the other apologized for scaring him, then it meant it wasn’t an illusion. Or maybe it was? Argh, he didn’t know anymore! So, he decided to go straight to the point.

“I’m Feliciano. Are you Ludwig?”

“H-how do you...? Ah, it must have been Elizabeta.” The stranger mumbled, sighing and cursing under his breath in a language Feliciano didn’t recognize. However, he still had the poise of a noble, and like a true noble he corrected himself and managed to stay gracious and polite. “She told you everything, I assume.”

The brunet nodded, a bit relieved when he confirmed the fairies were real.

“Yes. I am Ludwig.” He said, averting his eyes. “I have no excuse for my behaviour before. Even if I was surprised, threatening you like that... it is alright if you decide to leave and forget everything. No matter what Elizabeta told you, you are not forced to stay. I, uh, I treated you, as you can see, and it seems your fever went down, and... well, your belongings were kept dry, so whenever you are ready you can leave.”

The thick accent and the unfamiliarity with the language, or perhaps the fact he probably hasn’t talked this long with anyone, made the situation a bit funny to Feliciano. A strong, tall man mumbling his words and trying to seem confident when it was obvious he was flustered and nervous would never not be endearing, even if that same man made the brunet understand what real fear was. However, for some reason he felt at ease right now, the scene being strangely familiar. Lovino always said Feliciano was far too forgiving and kind for his own good, now he was understanding what he meant.

“Do you want me to go?” The prince asked, hugging his knees and covering part of his face with his arms to hide the small smile he had. Just as he suspected, Ludwig became troubled and started to stutter even more.

“I do not! I mean, it is not my place to dictate what you can or cannot do. I undoubtedly threatened you, even if I was under the effects of an evil spell, so you have the right to wish to leave.”

“But I was told only I could break the spell.”

“T-that is not true... someone else could enter the forest too.”

“Pft...”

Feliciano chuckled, since it was the exact same thing he told the fairy. This made Ludwig frown, unable to understand what was so funny and feeling a bit annoyed.

“What is it...?”

“Nothing, I’m just... relieved?”

“Huh?”

“I thought you were a terrible monster, but you’re just a guy. Anyone can become terrifying when they are scared and angry. You must’ve been very scared.”

Ludwig kept quiet for a few seconds, stunned, but Feliciano didn’t mind and

“You asked me if I was sent by the sorcerer. Was that the one who cursed you?” Feliciano asked in a low voice,

“Yes.” Ludwig replied in a low growl-like whisper, but he didn’t elaborate further. It didn’t take an expert to know this was a conversation the blonde didn’t want to have, so Feliciano left it at that and, instead, stood up with a bit of difficulty. “H-hey! Let me help you.”

Leaving the glowing flowers behind, Ludwig extended one hand towards the brunet, who couldn’t help but smile and accept it. Why did he look that nervous? Perhaps he thought Feliciano was still scared from before, but remembering the words that the Tulip flower said, he could see he was a person just like him. Too lonely and too scared. How could he not empathize when he felt like he was looking at his reflection?

His belongings had been left under a big tree, so he didn't have much difficulty finding them. They were dry, a thick mantle of black feathers protecting them, which made him chuckle. Ludwig did this, since he was the only one who had black wings. The image of the once scary beast plucking its wings to protect the *ghironda* and the backpack was endearing, helping him relieve his fear of it. Sitting beside it, he called Ludwig with a gesture and offered to join him.

“Thank God...! If something were to happen to this, I don't know what I'd do.” He mumbled, his fingertips tracing the strings while the blonde obliged.

“I see it is something precious.” Ludwig commented, his curiosity being noticeable.

“Yes, it was a gift from my father before he passed away.

“A-ah, I am sorry, I did not mean to...”

“Heh, it's alright. It was a long time ago, I don't even remember him or my mother... Do you like fairy tales?” Feliciano asked with a slight teasing tone. Judging by the faint blush in Ludwig's cheeks, it was a yes. “Then let me tell you a love story.”

The blonde man nodded slightly, his curiosity about Feliciano's life and his homeland and stories being as clear as water.

“Once upon a time, there was a frail commoner who worked in the palace as a servant. No one really knew where she was from, she just... appeared at the doors of the royal palace one day, asking for a place to stay in exchange of work. The prince was kind so he hired her without asking much and soon, they fell in love as if it was destiny. They say he played this same instrument and enchanted her with his voice.” He sighed as he tapped the *ghironda* with a finger, omitting the fact that the prince had been known as a ladies' man before they met. “All the court was against her marrying the prince, though. She had no surname, no gold to claim and no status to presume of, it was really suspicious, you see. They called her a temptress and a wicked witch who seduced the crown prince... Of course, even the king was against it since his son was the sole heir. Is there a royal heir who married for love, anyway?”

He laughed, trying to lighten the story, but it didn't seem to work. Ludwig stared at the waters moving slowly in front of them, but he had all his attention on Feliciano's story. That made him feel a little shy, so he started to play with one of the glowing flowers in his hand.

"The king never allowed them to get married. He was really strict about royal customs and tradition, but he was still weak to his son's begging so he allowed him to take the woman as a mistress. That is, until she got pregnant. The prince was the happiest man in the world; he thought that this meant they would finally be allowed to be recognized as a couple, as a family, but... They still didn't accept the woman and instead made her life even worse. After she gave birth to two children, they took them away from her, locking her in the highest tower of the palace so she wouldn't 'taint' the royal heirs with her commoner hands." His voice quieted down, almost like a lullaby. "They even accused her of being insane, probably just an excuse to ensure she would never be allowed to meet her children, whom were nursed by the palace maids and never got to see her. No matter how much the prince complained and demanded, she was kept locked there. Some say he became violent and drew his sword at the guards and some say he threatened the king himself, so he wasn't allowed to see his sons either. It was a royal order, no one but the king could do anything."

The gentle moonlight fell to the water, reflecting its pale glow on both men's faces.

"And she couldn't take it. She was already fragile before, the mistreatment put a huge toll on her body, plus, giving birth and then getting her children stolen away from her ultimately killed her. She died pitifully, hidden away in a tower and unable to even say goodbye to her loved ones. The notice destroyed the prince who followed her shortly after that. He couldn't forgive himself for not being able to protect the love of his life, so during a stormy night, he... he just jumped from the tower she died in, leaving his crown behind."

The blond gasped under his breath, looking directly at the brunet. No matter how eloquent he was, the way he told the story was like he was an outsider despite the growing suspicions Ludwig held. A mere bard telling the tale of two tragic lovers; even under the dim light of the moon, the blonde man could see the way Feliciano was absolutely detached from the story, like it wasn't about him or his family. Just a storyteller using his beautiful voice to entertain an audience.

"The king couldn't take it and he became ill too. He lamented being so blinded by duty and responsibility to the point he cornered two innocent people to that point, so he doted on his grandchildren, but... I can still remember the deep sadness he had in his eyes when he looked at us." Feliciano sighed, unknowingly admitting who the story was about as his eyes became duller and duller. "He established laws against discrimination after that and commoners became able to do more than just serve and cultivate crops, maybe he was atoning for his behaviour... He said we resemble the late Crown Prince, but I've seen portraits of him and we don't look alike at all, so I can only assume he feels guilty for her... not that I'd know, since she never had a portrait made of her."

He laughed it off, waving with a gesture with his hand.

"She never did anything wrong, she was only ostracized because of her status as a commoner, but nowadays in our kingdom commoners have important jobs and are able to study. My big brother is doing his best to keep it running, even if the nobles are against it, while I'm here fooling around. What a fearsome king he is, huh! At least something good came out of all this, and now I like to imagine the three of them are chatting wherever they are. I hope they're proud of my brother, he's doing his best... Ludwig?"

He wasn't speaking or, more importantly, he wasn't moving at all, his clear eyes staring right into Feliciano's soul, the one he tried so hard to keep hidden. He wanted to tease him, laugh about it and make a joke, but he was unable to. Those blue jeweled eyes would not allow him to, the familiarity he felt about them making him feel safe even if he was sure he was being judged. During a long silence, they stared into each other's eyes, Feliciano getting lost in Ludwig's, but he couldn't say anything. So he just waited.

"They were your parents? And was the king, the man who caused them to perish... Your grandfather?" Ludwig asked the obvious, but he still had to hear it from Feliciano who looked away and nodded.

"It sounds bad, but *nonno* isn't a bad person! normally don't tell anyone this, but I don't know why I wanted to tell you... Sorry, this must be awkward. It's not like it's a big deal anymore, *nonno* was a good man, seriously, I bet he just wanted what was best for my father..."

He started rambling, feeling his cheeks hot due to the shameful act he just put up. Was he trying to make Ludwig feel bad for him? Was that it? How embarrassing.

"I," Ludwig started, his voice trembling so faintly it was a miracle Feliciano noticed. "I had both my parents and my brother with me, but I never appreciated them enough and I resented them even when they died during the war. I resented them because they did their job as royals and did not spend time with me. I resented them because they left me a heavy burden and I resented the kingdom for being that same burden. Even now, I resent my fate and everyone I met, but you... why are you not angry at those who took your mother away from you? Of your grandfather, of the nobles... Why are you not resentful?"

With a glimpse of the Swan King's unknown life, Feliciano was stunned, both because he was curious as well and because of the question he didn't have an answer to.

"I... I don't know. Why am I not?" He wondered himself, lost in his thoughts. He would lie if he said he wasn't a little bit resentful when he thought about his mother and the way he could never meet her, however, he didn't want to dwell too deep in that ocean. He feared he would be drowned if he let the current guide him, where would that lead him? After a brief pause in which he carefully chose his words, he answered simply: "Maybe because I have people I love and the memories I made with them. If I held onto my anger, I would not see their faces clearly. I might be blinded by the resentment and I wouldn't be able to enjoy the beautiful things around me. I might not even have met you."

Ludwig looked at Feliciano with an expression the brunet thought he saw before. Maybe in a dream. He wanted to ask, "*why do you look like you're about to cry?*" But he didn't. He just waited patiently, letting the human warmth engulf Ludwig. If he really had been all alone for fifty years, it must be difficult for him to get accustomed to another human being.

"I do not understand you. I did not understand you before, and I do not understand you now." Ludwig finally said, sighing and feeling exhausted. It seemed he wanted to say more, but he didn't. What did he mean with 'before'? When he ran away scared? He didn't elaborate and Feliciano decided to not pry further.

Another silence settled in, only the wind blowing through the leaves accompanying them. It was a bit more awkward than before, so Feliciano couldn't take it any longer and decided to change the topic as swiftly as he could.

"How about we talk about each other's homelands?" He said softly, being an expert at changing themes of conversation, and even if Ludwig wasn't fooled, he nodded. "I want to know more about your kingdom. The villagers renovated some of the structures left and they were beautiful. What was it like? I noticed some of them seemed vastly different from each other. Why is that?"

"I... I think it was me. I, uhm, really liked constructing beautiful buildings." Ludwig explained, still a bit insecure about this change of topic, but once he saw Feliciano smile once again, he didn't have the heart to continue asking.

"Tell me everything!"

Feliciano's amber eyes sparkled once again, the smile becoming genuine at last. Ludwig pressed his lips together, containing any comment about it. It seemed that he was still weak to him, even in this world.

—♪—

As if time was a breeze, it quickly passed by without them noticing. The moment the moon started to hide behind the horizon, something seemed to resonate within Ludwig, who groaned in pain. This of course startled Feliciano, who without noticing had gotten closer to the point he could rest his hands on the other's back, trying to bring him comfort. The touch made Ludwig's pain vanish for a few seconds, but the moment he noticed it was the brunet's fingers, he moved away, being followed by a nervous prince.

"I... I have to go." Ludwig said, unable to look at Feliciano.

"H-huh...? Where are you going? It's this something relating to the curse?"

"I can only stay human during the night."

Human during the night? Did that mean that, during the day...?

"A-are you going to become *that* again...?"

He couldn't hide the imminent fear in his expression, his hands pressing his chest anxiously. This sight, although hurtful, was perfectly understandable for Ludwig, who didn't answer and instead started to walk towards the lake, sinking his feet into it. In the distance, some morning birds started to sing, announcing the arrival of dawn, but he couldn't appreciate the beauty of their voices. It was more like a trumpet sound, the one you would hear the moment the end of the world would start. He sensed that same despair grow inside him, unable to understand why he felt so strongly about it. He just knew he didn't want to part ways, like he had waited for so long to reunite with the other only to be separated again.

“B-but tomorrow you’ll become human again, won’t you?” Feliciano asked, maybe a bit too desperate. “I’ll come back! I’ll bring you sweets and tasty food a-and...”

Ludwig shook his head, now his body half-way inside the water.

“You do not have to if you...”

“But I do want to come back!” He interrupted, his lips curling in a small smile that stunned the blonde man, finally staring directly at him. “I know what you’ll say. You’re wrong, though, very wrong! I won’t leave you alone. I promise.”

Those words... they were all what Ludwig wanted to hear for fifty long years, but still, he couldn’t help but keep his worries close. Feliciano might’ve said that, but once he returned to the village, he might change his mind. He didn’t blame him, who would want to stay close to someone as hideous as the Swan King? And yet... those amber eyes looked directly at him, Ludwig. Not a king and not a monster.

For how long would they have that gleam of hope?

“Suit yourself.” Ludwig said, smiling bitterly while the same blinding light engulfed him, the lake washing away his true form.

This time Feliciano was prepared, but it was still too bright for him, so he used his arms to cover his eyes as he tried to watch what exactly was happening, but it was fruitless. The sun was rising and the sky was being painted with a gentle golden tone, contrasting with the blue and the white light from the water. In front of the round sun, a small figure appeared replacing the man that he mistakenly believed was a monster, slowly revealing the form he was cursed to live in...

“Quack.”

Feliciano blinked, the sound of quacking taking him out of this fantasy he was living in, just like waking up.

“Quack, quack.”

“P-Paperella?!”

Feliciano fell to his knees, having lost all his strength due to the surprise and the fact he didn’t sleep at all. The duck, no, Ludwig stared at him with an expression difficult to understand, but for Feliciano, it was as if he was waiting for a response to this revelation. With his short, orange legs, it shyly approached the prince and quacked once again, worried that he was ill once again, but soon, the brunet started to laugh and startled the small duck. The laughs were loud and brimming with relief, harmoniously mixing themselves with the sound of waterfalls in the distance.

“So that’s why you didn’t want the crumbs that fell to the ground...” Feliciano said, unable to contain his laughter once he imagined the absolutely horrified and insulted face Ludwig might’ve made once he was offered dirty food. So all this time, all those things he told tiny Paperella... It was Ludwig the one who heard them? Ah, between embarrassment and amusement, his mind was a disaster, but he somehow felt at ease. Lowering his right hand, he placed it onto the duck’s head and caressed it lovingly, his smile being far brighter than any magical light coming from an enchanted lake. “I’m sorry. I will bring you something that isn’t dirty.”

Ludwig stared at Feliciano, his duck face unable to convey the complicated emotions he was feeling right now, but maybe it was for the best. If Feliciano saw him aggressively blush like he knew he would, he wouldn’t hear the end of his teasing. It was okay, though. Somehow... Ludwig considered it wasn’t a bad thing. Even if he left for the village and didn’t return, his presence for just one night managed to make him feel human again. That was enough for small Paperella.

## Chapter End Notes

\* Bruder: Brother

\* Diamonds and Toads is a French fairy tale by Charles Perrault about two sisters who lived under their bad-tempered mother. The oldest was proud and behaved like her mother, so she was the favorite, while the youngest was kind and sweet, so she was abused by both of them. When the youngest drew water from a well, an old woman asked her for a drink of water, which she kindly gave her. The old woman in reality was a fairy who disguised herself to test human's morals and blessed the young girl. Now,

everytime she spoke, diamonds and pearls would fall from her mouth. When she went home, their mother sent the eldest daughter to the well, wanting her to be blessed too, but the fairy took the form of a noble woman instead and asked for a drink of water. The eldest daughter rudely refused and cursed her so everytime she spoke, toads and snakes would fall from her mouth. The mother was furious and kicked the youngest out, where she was found by a prince and got married.

\* The other inspiration for the tale is Rapunzel, where a beautiful girl is placed in a tall tower with no way out after the witch kidnapped her. She sang and a prince found her, asking her to let her hair fall so he could climb the tower, but the witch finds out and cuts Rapunzel's hair, causing the prince to fall and be blinded by thorns. Leaving Rapunzel abandoned in a swamp, she finds the prince and her tears heal him, so they get married and live happily ever after.

# Dances of the Swans

## Chapter Notes

Ahh, I've been so busy and tired and writer's block is a curse, but alas, here it is! I apologize for the wait, but I swear this is a long chapter and it took me ages to write. It was a lot of fun, though. Yesterday was Ludwig's birthday and I had planned to write a one-shot to celebrate it, but I didn't finish it in time and it bummed me out... Maybe I'll publish it later, since I have most of it written already. (-ω-、 )

Anyways, Swan King still has me in a chokehold, but my hands don't work at the same speed as my brain so it takes me longer to put my thoughts into words. I will do my best. (\*°▽°\*)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He may be really tired, but he still could walk since the strange ointment worked wonders. His ankle was almost cured, and even if he still felt uncomfortable, it didn't hurt; even his fever had almost disappeared and he had enough strength to hold all his belongings in both hands. For a moment he feared that once he left the forest, he would wake up and realize all that happened was a dream, so he couldn't help but stand behind the dense trees, just a few meters away from entering the "real world."

Fairies, magic flowers and cursed kings... it couldn't be real. All the songs and stories he told when he performed were just that, mere songs and stories. There was always a clear line between reality and the attractive realm of fiction, and deep inside him, he also knew his own dreams couldn't be real either. But now...

This was the moment of truth. Once he stepped into the sun once again, he would know if he had gone insane or not. It should be easy. Just one, simple step... and yet, the possibility of leaving behind everything he had come to discover proved to be too unbearable. The fairies, although a bit clumsy towards humans, were fun and kind to him, he wanted to know more about them. Perhaps understand the history of Schwanenberg and know how many fairy tales were real, if the fallen kingdom had been really ruled by a vain and selfish king and how he could bring that same king happiness once again.

Ludwig's face came to mind and the brunet felt his cheeks blush, attributing it to "*he's just my type, nothing more.*" If he really had been trapped in that forest for fifty years with no

other humans around, he wanted to help. Maybe not save him, since he was sure a useless and weak bard wouldn't be able to break any spells, but... he wanted to do something for Paperella, the small duck, and Ludwig, the man with the sad expression.

"Jeez... I still can't believe they're the same." He whispered to himself, letting out a small laugh, but realization hit him like a ton of bricks. Covering his lower face with his hand, the sheer embarrassment made him close his eyes tightly, unable to face the universe. "W-wait... that means... he saw me naked, didn't he?!"

Oh, dear. He really didn't want to realize that. The bashfulness he felt because of his royal upbringing was making him twist and turn like he had been possessed, unable to cope with the shame. He thought it was just a duck, how would he know it was actually a man? Not his fault! It was the curse's fault! And speaking of curses... Ludwig did mention something about the sorcerer, so he had to be real too. The Swan King fairy tale seemed to have most details spot on, but he still couldn't believe everything about it. Paperella, er, Ludwig didn't look like a vain and selfish king, although he had to admit fifty years of solitude would humble anyone, but... he was sure there was more to the story. Something the writer didn't want others to know, as if they had a clear bias. Who even wrote the book in the first place? Did they know a lot about magic and enchantments?

If fairies, sorcerers and enchanted lakes were real, and there were people who knew about those subjects, then maybe... the place in his dreams was real too. Maybe the lake in his fantasies was the one Ludwig dwelled in. And maybe, they could help him understand more about it.

Maybe... he could meet *him* at last.

The moment his thoughts fell on his lover's gentle figure, a sudden sharp pain caused him to stumble backwards, feeling as if his head was being split open by an unknown force. It was just for a few seconds, but the amount of pain was so great he felt the air abandoning his lungs like a river drying up overnight. His brain was getting squished by unforgiving and monstrous hands and as quick as he felt like he would die from the pain, he realized he felt fine again. Did he imagine it? But it felt so vivid he couldn't think about anything else... Ah, this forest had to be cursing him as well or something... ah, but he would return nonetheless, there was no doubt. He had to discover if that lake was the one from his dreams, hesitating like this was useless.

Taking a deep breath, Feliciano stepped into the sunlight, the one that washed the Swan King's true form away and the one that might prove if the events of last night were real or not. With his eyes shut, the bard had left the woods and was now standing in the "real world." But he was still awake, the warm rays of sun feeling like a hug and maintaining all memory of last night.

"So it was real..." He mumbled to himself, almost not believing it. It was real. Those fairies really existed, the lake from the fairy tale was an actual lake and there was a cursed king who became a terrifying monster. Everything actually happened and he survived it alone, with no need of . "It was real! Oh my God! My brother won't believe it!"

Of course, as any sibling would, he wanted to brag about this. Feeling all giddy and excited on the inside, he spent some minutes basking in the sunlight and enjoying the realization that magic was real. Ah, his inner child was healing, he wanted to dance and sing and sing and dance and scream at the top of his lungs that magic was real, but instead he decided to just hug his *ghironda* as gently as possible. Stay calm, Feliciano, what would *nonno* say if he saw you this restless? Something along the lines of "*very cute!*" probably.

"Um, excuse me." A male voice spoke, surprising Feliciano and making him come back to Earth. It was Rainer, the young man who had been subjected to the improvisation. However, he didn't seem angry or resentful, instead he had gentle and worried eyes and was carrying a pickaxe on his shoulders. "What are you doing here so early, sir? It's dangerous to be so close to the forest."

"I, uh, I wanted to see it up close. A bard like as a myself can't help but feel attracted to legends and such." Feliciano explained, doing his best to smile as usual despite the sheer embarrassment he felt due to the dumb scene he was making. He sure hoped the other didn't see him giggling to himself.

"Huh..." Rainer mumbled while gripping the pickaxe, his expression making it clear he did indeed see Feliciano giggling to himself. However, just like Hildegard said, he was a polite young man and didn't mention it. More than being weirded out, he seemed genuinely worried. "You know the story, right? You could become insane if you get too close... Those who laid eyes upon the forest beast were never the same."

"The forest beast? It wasn't in the storybook."

"I personally don't think it's a reliable source, since it's written like a fairy tale. We don't even know who wrote it, my grandfather always said it was sketchy and that magic wasn't real." The brown-eyed man explained, his expression darkening. "When I was eight, he ventured into the woods to prove there was no monster, but... when he returned, three days had passed and he was completely out of his mind, mumbling something about a forest monster and that it was chasing him. He would write nonsensical and long letters detailing his experience, how he ran from the monster and how it was like a demon with its huge horns and goat legs, sometimes he even drew it and it was horrible, he... He never recovered and died some weeks after that. I don't want to see anyone like that again."

Feliciano didn't answer for a solid minute, the story pouring through Rainer's lips with a deep resentment and grief attached to it. Upon noticing the silence, Rainer's face flushed slightly, flustered and nervous.

"I-I know you are an outsider and that this sounds like a scared villager's gibberish, but..." He feared he wasn't being taken seriously.

"I see." Feliciano said, calm and with an understanding voice, almost apologetic and lowering his head to the point he was bowing. "I was foolish and insensitive, I apologize."

"H-huh...? No, I didn't mean for you to apologize, you wouldn't have known..." It was clear Rainer wasn't used to receiving apologies, so he didn't know what to do. It seemed that he always had this role of a protective and emotional man, so he was always teased by his peers because of how sensitive and superstitious, so having this obvious noble bowing his head towards him was troubling. "Just... I was just worried. Even if magic isn't real, there may be dangerous animals in there, so..."

"Rainer! Are you coming or not?"

Soon, many male voices were calling him; it was the other young men of the village. There were few of them and it seemed they were on the way to work, since they all had their pickaxes with them.

"Oh, it's the bard."

"Hey! Treat him with respect, remember he's a noble."

"Wait, what? He is?"

"Duh."

"Silence, you two!"

Jürgen popped from behind the two gossiping men, and since he was the shortest of them all, he had to look up while talking to them. Thankfully he was still taller than Feliciano and his ashy blonde hair made him stand up from his peers. Glancing at the bag pack and the instrument in his hands, he asked:

"Are you leaving already?"

"Oh, no, I was just looking around. I feel uncomfortable if I leave my belongings behind." Feliciano explained, utilizing his natural charisma to make his white lie as smooth as possible. He wasn't actually lying, since he was attached to his things.

"I see, I get it. It's like leaving a piece of pie for yourself, you never know when someone else will eat it instead." Jürgen dedicated Rainer a glare that lasted for about two seconds before looking once again at Feliciano. "We'll go work until noon, do you want to come? It may not be as pretty, but hey, it's still something new to watch. I bet you've never seen a mine before."

Feliciano felt really tired and he wanted to sleep properly for once, but something pushed him to smile and nod without him realizing.

"Sure, that sounds interesting!" He said, his words not belonging to him. He felt as if a dark smoke was fogging his vision, but there was nothing there. Maybe he was really tired, that must be it. "I'll leave my belongings behind, I don't want to be a bother."

"Heh, don't worry! The only bother here is Mister Ladykiller." He shot another glare towards Rainer and then smiled again. "We'll meet you in ten minutes at the mine, it's right next to the entrance of the village. Let's go, boys."

With a string of "*hell yeah!*" and "*you got it, chief*" following them, the young men left laughing and joking around, leaving Feliciano to ponder about what just happened. Why did he agree? He didn't even realize and now he felt as if he was cheated. It just got weirder and weirder. Looking behind him, the dense forest leaves were moved by the wind, like whispering amongst themselves.

"If I go, maybe I'll get some clues." He rationalized and nodded. Yeah, that made sense.

—ξ⁹⁹⁹ξ—

"Don't worry, Feliciano. I'll keep your stuff safe."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"It's Hildegard... ah, whatever." She sighed, feeling like she had been called old. "So you're going to the mines today? Why in the world would you even get near that thing? That place is not suitable for anyone who appreciates clean air."

Despite being the wife of a miner, Hildegard didn't hide the absolute contempt she had reserved for that job, maybe because her husband spent more time mining and drinking instead of being a father, Feliciano hadn't even met him yet.

"I have never been to a mine before. It's an experience I want to have, even if it's just one time... Besides, I would be a bad tourist if I didn't visit Schwanenberg's main business." He said, smiling in a relaxed manner as he patted Gisela's head, who had been by his side ever since he knocked on the door. She was clingier than usual, but it seemed more like she was examining him, the fairy who had survived sleeping outside and even returned her handchierchief, clean and with a refreshed smell. "And there's this other thing I wanted to ask, if it's not too much of a bother..."

He was feeling a bit embarrassed to even think about asking Hildegard another thing, after lying and using her kindness to his advantage.

"The plum cake you baked was absolutely delicious, I wondered if I could have a bit more of it."

"Mhm? Sure thing, but I don't have anything baked right now."

"Oh, no! It's not for right now, I was thinking I could come and pick it up in the evening."

"Evening? Why so late?"

So he could give it to a cute duck named Paperella, but it's actually a human being.

He would look like a madman if he said that, so he had to be quick and make a believable excuse. Thankfully, he was an expert at using his words, so the subsequent lie was as natural as the breeze.

“It’s a custom from my homeland, you see. We have this tea time where we eat something sweet and delicious under the moonlight, but I don’t know how to bake at all... I-I can pay you, ma’am.”

“With what money?” She asked, raising an eyebrow as if she didn’t believe that story of his. Once Feliciano felt his cheeks burn with embarrassment when realizing he had no money, the woman let out a laugh. “Hey, it’s okay! Even if it’s not that late, we also have tea time usually, so I bake something most days. I can give you some with no problem. Don’t look at me like that, you look like a puppy who got reprimanded.”

She seemed to be amused by Feliciano’s reaction, who was thanking her with a nervous smile. Thankfully it ended well and it seemed like Gisela hadn’t said anything about their secret... Ah, what was he teaching kids? To lie to their parents? Shame on you, Feliciano. Shame on you.

Waving goodbye to the two women, he left his belongings with them and followed the instructions of the villagers to reach the entrance to the mine, where he met with Rainer and the others. They were all so tall and the general hair color was blonde or light brown, something that made him think of Ludwig. When he was younger, did he look like them? But he did mention he had to take the burden of a king at a young age. He couldn’t have been this carefree in his youth, just like him. With an oil lamp on his hand, Jürgen started to guide them all into the dark cavern, but instead of being a solemn and serious occasion, most of the young men were laughing and whispering inside-jokes to themselves, Feliciano having no way of being a part of it. He didn’t really mind, though. He was just a tourist after all. An outsider.

He thought the swan-shaped mountain was already amazing and the dark and small entrance to the mine felt like the spooky beginning of a horror story, but nothing could’ve prepared him for the next scene; a faint light traveled through the corridors, like a path, and illuminated their faces slightly.

"What is that light?" Feliciano asked, visibly nervous and hiding behind a smiling Jürgen, who probably knew he would react like this.

"You'll see."

He was already seeing, but he didn't have the words to describe what it was. After a narrow turn in which they had to pass one by one, the light had blinded him for a few moments and he was greeted by a huge chamber, rising many meters tall and being held together with wood columns. There were many archways that connected the whole cage together, but what really took his attention were the many gemstones peeking through its walls; the colors varying from many shades of red to beautiful field-like greens. They weren't like anything he had seen before, and as a pampered prince, he knew a lot of jewels but he didn't recognize a single one.

"We've been excavating for years, but they never stop popping out." Jürgen explained, clicking with his fingers one of the stones with a satisfied smile. "We mine a bit and then, boom, another of these veins appears. Isn't it like magic?"

"It's not magic. It's just geology." Rainer intervened, sighing and holding the pickaxe in his hands.

"Sheesh, what a party pooper."

"Yeah, don't you know the basics of tourism, Rainer? Just bullshit everything!"

"Dude, the tourist is here, shouldn't you shut up?"

"Oh, fuck, you're right. Sorry, man."

"Ah... no, it's okay. I didn't hear anything." Feliciano mumbled, unable to contain his laughter while he pretended he knew nothing. The others found this hilarious, but Rainer was having none of it and, like the party pooper he was, he claimed they all had to start working and that he would be the one who showed the bard around since he had the least foul mouth of all.

“We call these magic stones, not because they hold any sort of magic, but because of their light. They never stop shining... well, unless we take them out of the village. It’s a shame, but we can still sell them for a high price if we polish them.” Rainer explained, showing Feliciano one of the polished gemstones. “We usually make jewelry with them and they are really sturdy, not even falling from a second floor can break them. There are also iron veins nearby, so we sell all sorts of tools and... Ah, w-was I talking too much?”

Feliciano shook his head, smiling faintly.

“It’s okay, I would love to know more. Were these mines here when you guys got here?”

“Actually, they were!” Rainer lit up again, happily spreading his knowledge to anyone who was willing to listen. The oil lamp flickered slightly as he moved around. “These are ancient mines, they were already here when we arrived... The veins have been exploited for ages, but they still have a lot to offer. I don’t think it’s magic, though, the mountain is huge after all. There are some corridors we haven’t explored yet, since it’s really dangerous and confusing...”

Rainer paused for a moment, stopping to illuminate one of the red gems as they heard the faint sound of pickaxes hitting stone in the distance.

“My grandfather found a necklace here, made by the people who were here before. It was his treasure, he only showed it to me once but I still remember it clearly. It was made of these same red gems, but when he went mad he hid it away, saying it was attracting the forest monster. It was a shame, it could’ve helped study the ancient kingdom, if it even existed in the first place.”

Feliciano maintained his silence, not knowing if he should tell him what he saw last night. Even if he wanted to, what would he say, exactly? Hey, I met a duck who is actually the Swan King from the story, he’s under a curse and the kingdom and the legend was real. Ah, it would be better to keep quiet. Besides, the fairies had warned him he could not tell anyone about this.

“Well, I have to go back to work, but I can’t leave you here...”

“It’s okay, I won’t stray too far. I’ve seen enough, I think, so I will be returning in a while.”

“Are you sure? You remember the way back? I mean, it has signs and everything, but...”

“I told you, it’s okay! Don’t you have work to do? Ladies don’t like lazy men, I bet you want to look cool in front of her. What’s cooler than coming back from work all rugged and manly?”

Rainer flinched at the mention of ladies and averted his eyes, letting out a small laugh.

“I suppose you would know better about women, you’ve traveled and met a lot of them, huh...”

Feliciano didn’t answer and just smiled as if he was guilty. He did flirt with a lot of ladies and gentlemen, but nothing came of it since he did his best to not get too close. Rainer didn’t have to know that, though, now Feliciano would enjoy a reputation as a wise sage who knew the ways of the heart and love... or something like that.

Leaving the lamp oil behind so Feliciano could see in his way back, he was left alone in that dark and huge chamber with only a small table and a chair to keep him company. He could hear the young men laughing, their voices echoing like the murmurs of a past age trapped in the mine. This was a really intriguing mine, actually. He wasn’t that surprised with the gems, since after meeting fairies and monsters nothing could faze him. What he wanted to know the most was the story behind it. Was this a mine that existed during Ludwig’s time as a king? He could ask him once he returned. He could ask him a lot of things, actually, but it didn’t occur to him at the moment, maybe because he was still digesting everything that happened.

The brunet touched the gemstones softly, their glow being almost hypnotic. The tingling sound they made when his fingers hit them was quite nice, the notes being different enough to the point they could almost make a melody if he tried. He was a bard, after all, music was the thing he was best at. He could make this work.

Hitting them with the tips of his fingers, he made some noise that could be classified as the first twelve notes of a song and, with that, he heard a laugh.

“Huh...?”

A female laugh, more specifically. It was like an echo, coming straight from inside the wall.

“Of course it’s a laugh.” He mumbled, trying to calm his heart due to the fright. He was in a magic forest, so a magic cave couldn’t be that different, right? It still freaked him out. He waited for a few minutes, hoping it was a prank from the others or something like that, but he heard nothing that wasn’t pickaxes hitting stone. Maybe he imagined it.

He hit the gemstones again, the same melody.

*Fa Mi Fa Re Mi Fa Re Mi Sol La Fa # Sol*

And he heard it again, more clearly. It wasn’t a laugh. It was more like the sound of sobbing, which was even more scary to him. However, he remembered he was also scared when he first heard the fairies laugh, so he assumed this could be another mesmerizing and good being waiting for him to find it. It was wishful thinking, probably, but after meeting such wondrous beings, he kinda wanted to know more and more about the remnants of magic in that place. And so, despite the alarm bells ringing in his head, he completed the melody, humming it while hitting the gemstones with nervous fingers.

*Do Si Sib Sol Sib La Sol Re Do Sib La La Sol Fa# Sol*

... But the cries stopped. No magical light except for the already glowing gems appeared, no small fairy appeared in front of him and there wasn’t a girl crying anywhere.

Maybe he got it wrong? Maybe he was just being dramatic. Maybe- what in the world was that.

A strange figure made of dark smoke had appeared in the room and it started to move, the faint light of the gemstones getting duller as it crept closer to Feliciano while the oil lamp kept flickering.

“*Ahi, mio Dio!*” He let out a screech of fear and surprise, stumbling with the chair and almost tripping on it. He managed to lean on one of the stone walls, as if it would protect him from that creature that was becoming more and more human-like. Spooky places like these

weren't his thing, he knew that now, why did he even come? Aahhh, he was going to die and...!

The figure raised its... hands? And something started to materialize on them. Some sheets of very old paper, floating right in front of a trembling Feliciano who was praying to every god who could hear him. The figure didn't seem to be violent, but it was scary as hell and once it had finished its duty, it disappeared once again, leaving the bard alone with that adrenaline rush that he had felt for two days in a row now.

It took him five minutes or more to get himself together, repeating in his mind this was a magic place and of course smoke figures would haunt him sometimes, because why wouldn't they? Thankfully, the lamp's flame hadn't gone out, so he could still see what was in front of him. Extending his hands towards the very nice gift of that smoke monster, the few sheets of yellow paper had fallen to the ground; the letters were so old some of them had vanished, but he could still read it clearly. It was a short story and it had just one illustration made in black ink, depicting a humanoid goat.

“*Satanella.*

*Once upon a time, a cruel and hideous devil lived on top of a mountain. With a goat body and horns, he terrorized the fairies living near him and laughed at the incompetence of humans. ‘Such silly beings!’ He said to himself arrogantly, tricking them into signing pacts and then stealing everything from them just so he could see them in despair.*

*However, there was one human he found intriguing. It was a wise and young witch, the town’s herbalist. She wasn’t tricked by the promises of gold and fame of the devil and she warned the villagers, confronting him and telling him no matter what, the trust and bonds amongst her and the villagers were unshakable.*

*The devil was angry at this, but he was also amused and decided to play by their rules. Transforming into a beautiful woman named Satanella, he didn’t use any enchantments or illusions to trick humans and instead used his extensive knowledge as an ancient being, becoming a trusted and bright girl who helped those in need. Seducing the herbalist and offering her many secrets she so desperately craved in exchange for her soul, she amassed a perfect reputation while the herbalist’s worsened over time. The witch saw through this trick too, but no matter how much she tried to expose the devil, to the villagers he looked like a fragile damsel in distress being targeted by the herbalist’s wicked jealousy. The villagers*

*defended the devil and kicked the witch out of the village, treating her like an evil woman and soon, she had no one by his side. All the people she loved had turned their backs on her.*

*The devil then claimed victory. 'Those humans you so dearly loved and helped left you to rot! Where are those bonds you said you had? You should've taken my hand instead.' Satanella's enchanting laugh only pierced further into the herbalist's heart who, with nothing else to lose, smiled bitterly and said: 'You are right. Our bounds were nothing but flimsy promises of convenience. I thank you for allowing me to see this.' And, with a hidden dagger, she stabbed her own chest six times, falling from the tall swan-shaped mountain. The devil, unable to foresee this, couldn't rescue the herbalist and finally understood that what he really wanted wasn't to ruin her or take her soul as sworn enemies, but to hold her hand as a lover instead. However, he realized his true feelings too late and it didn't matter how much knowledge he had, the ignorance of human emotions robbed him of his true love.*

*Struck with grief and regret, the devil's body vanished and his whole being was scattered through the mountain and nearby forest, doomed to search for the only human who managed to outsmart him and steal his soul and heart for all of eternity."*

... Huh.

Now he had two things to ask Ludwig.

He heard someone approaching and Jürgen walked through the arch, sweat dripping from his brow.

“Hey, Rainer told me you were going back, but he wouldn’t stop worrying so I came to guide you through the cave.” He explained, and while he could sound annoyed at first, he was eager to help out. Once he saw the paper on Feliciano’s hands, however, he got curious and walked towards him. “What do you have there?”

“Uh, it’s... I found it here.”

“Here? In the cave?”

“... Yes.”

Jürgen raised an eyebrow, having a hard time believing it. Maybe some of the miners left it behind? But it looked so old, how did they miss this?

“Can I take a look?”

“Ah... Sure, go ahead.” Feliciano didn’t know what to say to prevent the young man from reading the story, so he just gave him the papers in hopes it wouldn’t be too suspicious. “It’s just a fairy tale, is it from the book of your folktales? I don’t know what it’s doing here.”

But the blond didn’t answer. His eyes traveled through the words slowly and carefully, almost like they didn’t believe what they were seeing. Feliciano could see his hands slightly wrinkle the paper and his expression hardened.

“Where did you find this?” He asked in a low voice, sending shudders down Feliciano’s spine.

“I-it was right here, in the ground.”

Jürgen didn’t answer for a few moments, his eyes fixated on the drawing of the goat creature.

“Don’t let Rainer see this.”

“Why?” Feliciano asked, getting a small hunch about where this was going. A goat monster wandering in the forest. “Is it... is this creature the same his grandfather drew?”

“So he told you.” The blonde man said, sighing once Feliciano nodded. “Yes. Rainer’s grandfather drew this monster just like this as he was dying. I don’t know why or how this thing appeared here, but...”

“What thing?”

Feliciano felt his heart tighten as he heard Rainer enter the chamber as well, dust and dirt in his clothes and face.

“Jürgen? What is it?” He asked, a bit surprised when he noticed the icy air around them. The lamp’s oil had run out, so the flame was weakening and weakening, which allowed Jürgen to wrinkle the old and fragile paper in a quick and unwavering gesture, hiding it in his pockets. “What was that?”

“Nothing. I was about to help the bard get out of this stuffy cave, are you joining us? Ladykiller Rainer is going to skip work?”

“Huh? No, I’m not! I was just worried.”

The topic change was a bit unnatural, but Rainer didn’t ask any further questions. After bickering a bit with his friend, the young man returned to work as Jürgen waved him goodbye, his smile intact. However, even as the darkness was settling on the cave with only the glowing gemstones as a source of light, Feliciano could see a deep sea of worry in his eyes. A sea that had been colored with another feeling he knew like the back of his hand.

Longing.

“I won’t tell him anything.” Feliciano said, almost whispering while he raised the lamp oil, carrying it. He didn’t specify what he meant, but it seemed like the blond understood nonetheless.

“Thank you.”

The silence settled in and was never broken, not even when they left the narrow caves and returned to the daylight.

The forest had no monsters roaming around it, not even with the sweet smell that Feliciano carried with him as he made his way through the woods, faint daylight passing through. He had left his backpack behind, since he was already carrying a basket full of many baked goods that Hildegard was kind enough to prepare for him. She asked some questions, sure, but the bard had evaded them like a master at words. *“Just don’t eat them all at once, you’ll get a stomachache”* She said, sighing as she saw him leave.

He wouldn’t, since this was all for a certain duck, who he glimpsed swimming in the lake once he finally reached it. It was real, standing right in front of his eyes again. This made him irrationally happy, the wave of relief running through his whole body as he practically jumped through the grass, his voice loud and cheerful.

“Ludwig, Ludwig!” He called out, making the duck flinch. Once it looked at him, reacting to its name, he knew it was in fact Ludwig and, ah, how happy he was it was all real! He still couldn’t believe it. Sitting in the same spot as before, he laid down the basket and opened the upper part, letting the delicious and sweet smell of cake flow through the forest, a smell that of course attracted the main objective of this whole ordeal.

“Quack!”

“I told you, didn’t I? I would come back with lots of sweets. It’s barely afternoon, so you might have to eat it as a duck, but...”

“Quack, quack! Quack!”

“Pfft, I got it, I got it.”

As if he could understand, and maybe he could, Feliciano laid down a red tablecloth and looked at Ludwig with a smug face, as if he wanted praise for being this prepared. The duck just shook his head, sighing but unable to contain his excitement once he saw so many sweets in one place. It had been so many years he had almost forgotten what they looked like, even if these were a bit different to what he used to eat when he was a human.

“We have plum cake, apple pie, strawberry pie...” The brunet started to count them as he put them on the tablecloth, each with its own plate. He could almost see Ludwig drool, if ducks could even do that.

Far, but not too far, the fairies were sitting and hidden in between the grass and flowers, observing the scene like it was something amazing. And it was!

“We need to help the human...! He’s under that monster’s claws!” Chiara mumbled, tugging Isabel’s arms but lacking the courage to even think about confronting the duck.

“You think so, *cariño*? He looks like he is having fun.”

“He even brought Ludwig some strange food. Maybe it’s poisoned?”

“It’s not poisoned, Anya. Stop having those scary thoughts!”

“Fufu.”

“And stop smiling like that, you’re giving me the creeps!”

“I’m just smiling normally, aren’t I, Tolys?”

The Rue fairy flinched once he heard his name being called by Anya, having to look away from the human to try and not make her angry.

“Uh, yes, you are smiling. Normally.”

“See?”

“Stop right there! Like, if you’re gonna be a total creep, do it far away from me and Tolys, ‘kay?” Feliks intervened, putting himself between Tolys and Anya with his prideful demeanor. “And you are totes forbidden from interacting with Feli, he’ll freak out if you appear in front of him.”

This really angered the Chamomile fairy, but she kept her smile intact.

“I didn’t know you guys were already calling each other by nicknames... I thought we hated humans.” She said in a soft voice despite having hidden anger in her eyes. Feliks was one of the few fairies who actually stood up to her, and it pissed her off.

“We do!” Roderich said, sighing. “But this human is an opportunity for us. If he breaks the spell, we’ll be free, so I agree with Feliks. We can’t afford to lose him, so all of you must be on your best behaviour!”

“Shh! Guys, keep it down! I’m trying to hear what they are saying.” Elizabeta shushed them, with her hands moving the grass in front of her so she could have a better view of the duck and the human. “Hehe... Look, Roderich! Ludwig is eating! He looks like a normal duck, isn’t it cute?”

“I don’t think there’s anything cute in that boy, but if you say so...”

“And what are those strange things he brought? They are eating, so I think it’s food, but...” The Rue fairy was more interested in the cakes, a fact that didn’t go unnoticed for Feliks. Roderich, like the know-it-all that he was, explained to them what they were.

“They are called ‘pastries’ and they are a human delicacy-”

“Let’s steal some!”

“W-what? Hey! Feliks, come back!”

Elizabeta was far too slow and couldn’t stop Feliks, who had fluttered his wings and flew straight towards Feliciano and Ludwig. With horror, the Tulip fairy watched as the beautiful and perfect scene was ruined once both Anya and Chiara had followed him, all of them wanting to try the pastries as well.

“N-noooo!”

The Poppy fairy was the first to speak.

“Hiii, Feli! These are other fairies, but they aren’t as important as me, so whatevs.” He waved his hands happily.

“Ah...!” Feliciano blinked once and then twice, being obvious he didn’t expect them to show up, but then again, this was their home, so he couldn’t just ask them to leave. The duck’s angry quacks, however, were very similar to the annoyed voice of an old man telling the kids to get off his lawn, but none of the fairy actually looked at Ludwig. Feliks even let out a laugh once he heard him, shaking his head.

“I can’t understand you, like, at all. I bet he’s saying we can take as many pastries as we like, right? Was the word?”

“Uh, yes, but...”

“Aw, come ooon, Feli! We’ve never tried anything like this before, it’s new for us! We’ve been trapped here for soooo long, please, pleaseeee, let us have a tiny bite!”

Feliks’ whines were like a spoiled kid’s and Feliciano knew if he let him have his way, it would become troublesome later on, but before he even spoke, the other unknown fairies talked as well.

“Wouldn’t it be better if you ate with us?” Anya said, pinching her long dress and introducing herself to the human with a spooky smile.

“I agree! Eating with *that* thing will make you sick, human. Trust me! I’m the smartest fairy!” The Lily fairy said, her curl swinging with pride as she spoke.

“By *that* thing, do you mean Ludwig...?”

“Ugh, duh! Don’t you know what he is? Not a cute duck, that’s for sure!”

The un-cute duck quacked once again at this, but it was weaker this time since, well, she was kinda right.

“Jeez, Chiara, you’re so mean. But you’re totes right.” Feliks said, laughing out loud while Anya nodded. Their voices were soft and high-pitched that if Feliciano didn’t know what they were talking about, he would think it was a nice conversation. But it wasn’t.

“H-hey, you’re being too cruel.” The human said, frowning slightly while he looked at Ludwig, who had stopped moving or quacking and instead averted his eyes. He could see a strange dark hue starting to grow on his feathers, but he didn’t have time to examine further.

“We aren’t the cruel ones here, though?” Anya said in a chilly tone, tilting her head to one side while she kept smiling. Lifting herself off the ground with her long wings, she spoke in Feliciano’s ear, but it was loud enough for everyone to hear. “Didn’t Elizabeta tell you everything? He’s a hideous monster who is being punished by his own actions and we were dragged to this whole mess. Aren’t we entitled to be angry at him?”

“W-well, being angry and being cruel are two different things!”

“Fufu, is it? We never knew what cruelty was in the first place, this is just the way fairies are. It is the humans who brought this concept to our world, along with greed and hatred.” She let out a harmonious laugh, reminiscent of small bells tingling.

“I just wanted to eat some pastries, like, why be so defensive?” Feliks muttered, but he felt someone clutching their hands on his shoulder. It was Chiara, who was trembling like a leaf. Just then, he noticed the whole lake was being covered by dark clouds above them and he then realized they had gone too far. “H-hey, Anya, that’s enough!”

But she wasn’t listening and instead, was now looking directly at the small and helpless duck in the ground where it belonged. It wouldn’t meet her eyes, since they both knew she was right.

“If that thing wasn’t as vain and selfish as he was, none of this would’ve happened.”

“You, q-quit it already!”

“He blamed everyone but himself, isn’t that cruel too?”

“Hey! It’s getting darker!”

“His kingdom’s fall and disappearance...”

The Chamomile fairy’s words were like poison, unlike the flower that had birthed her.

“It was aaaaaaaaaall his fault!”

A thunder's loud shriek made them all flinch and it was the signal Feliks needed to drag Anya away while Chiara followed them closely behind with no pastries to their name. Feliciano felt the hair on his nape stand up, a signal of fright, and he turned around to verify if Ludwig was alright, but the duck wasn't there. Leaving small and black feathers behind, he had walked towards the lake, obscured by heavy and dark clouds above it. He wasn't lashing out like before, there was no rain or wind, but he knew something was wrong.

“Ludwig...?”

#### Chapter End Notes

\* "Ahi, mio Dio": Ouch, my God.

\* Satanella, also known as Love and Hell, is a ballet based on Jacques Cazotte's 1772 occult romance *The Devil in Love*. It tells the story of a young and wise man. He invokes Satan who, upon seeing him, falls in love with him and assumes the appearance of a beautiful young woman named Biondetta, who does her best to seduce him and make him fall in love with her, but ultimately fails and leaves to never return again.

\* "Cariño": Dear

# Dance of the Corps de Ballet and the Dwarves

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The sound of water was quite peaceful in comparison with the menacing clouds above them, but even if the fairy's words were harsh, it didn't seem like Ludwig would lash out like last time. Or at least, he was trying not to; the feathers were like a ticking clock, with each passing second they darkened more and more. Was what that fairy said true? It wasn't like Ludwig could defend himself, unless they all understood his quacking.

"Ludwig?" Feliciano called out again, softer than before. The duck's tail flinched, but he didn't look back and just kept swimming in circles like he was trying to calm down. The bard wanted to say something, but he didn't know what exactly, especially since he didn't know anything about the situation. For all he knew, the fairytale could be one hundred percent accurate and Ludwig could be evil incarnated, but... "Hey, whatever she said, I know there's more to it. Things like this are... never that simple."

Yeah, it didn't matter how much people tried to push others into 'good' and 'evil'. It all became so complicated when taking in account their feelings and motivations. Maybe that's why Feliciano was so attracted to the dream world, since there were no evil guys to fight or pain to endure. It was just a fictitious paradise to escape from all the complexities of life and the human heart.

Extending his hand towards the lake, Feliciano touched the waters with a single finger and saw how it caused small ripples on it until they grew bigger and bigger. A single, seemingly harmless decision could lead to these massive consequences and one would be left wondering when did it go so wrong.

"Someone could feel like they are doing the right thing, only to end up hurting those they wanted to protect." Feliciano mumbled, which made the duck lift his eyes towards him. This made the prince smile slightly, a bit flustered. "I don't know anything. Maybe that fairy is right, maybe you were bad and foolish, but... It's been so many years. You had to endure this loneliness for so long, repenting and regretting everything."

He remembered his grandfather and his last days of life. He remembered how remorseful he was and how much he apologized for leaving his two grandchildren behind, all alone in a den

full of hungry wolves. He also remembered the nights where the king was delirious, calling out a woman's name and asking for her forgiveness. Sometimes their grandpa would even grasp onto one of his grandchildren's shoulders, calling them by his son's name and begging for them not to go. Feliciano was then guided out of the room by the servants, but he would never forget how small and vulnerable his *nonno* looked and how different it was from the strong and dignified king he had grown to admire. He spent so many years under crushing grief and regret, but he always did his best to provide everything for his grandchildren and never waver in front of them. How lonely it was for him to have no one to confide in? His last days weren't physically painful, but Feliciano now understood the reason why his grandfather seemed to be in such pain.

To be all alone in a dying body with only regrets haunting you...

He didn't want to see anyone else go through that.

“Do you want to hear a song?”

The duck tilted its head once he heard Feliciano speak once again, the clouds above the lake faltering.

Many of the pastries Feliciano had brought were already eaten, since Ludwig had quite the appetite, but he brought another thing with him. An instrument he couldn't part ways with no matter what.

“Quack.”

Ludwig swam slowly and got closer to the bard and the *ghironda*, remembering this was a gift from Feliciano's father. The brunet checked if it was tuned and let out a small laugh once he noticed the attentive gaze of the bird. Even under black feathers, those eyes stayed as blue as the sky.

“When I was upset, hearing music always made me feel better. I hope this works out for you too, Paperella.” The nickname had to stay, since it was too cute even if the owner was in

reality a tall man, a man who was now staring directly at the gracile movements of the bard who had placed the instrument on his lap.

This song was one he wrote himself when he was younger, the months following his grandfather's passing. To endure the hostile environment, Feliciano had drowned himself in music and arts; when his brother, who was doing his best to stabilize the palace, felt too overwhelmed, he would often invite him to the gardens and sing with him. That was their own private world, away from the greed and the pain. He hadn't given a name to this song, since he felt it would steal away the magic of it, but he only sang it when he or his brother was in need of comfort. Now, it would comfort Ludwig.

Pressing the keys and turning the crank, the song engulfed the small duck as the clouds above them vanished while the sun started to set. With each note accompanied by the wind, the feathers started to become golden once again and the clean melody seemed like it had lyrics, but it actually didn't need to. The feeling itself was as clear as the lake reflecting the sky above; a strange yet familiar sensation of longing to return to the past, only to have to keep moving forward in spite of all the pain. Feeling as if you've lost an irreplaceable part of yourself and wondering if you will ever get it back, and...

Getting better day by day.

The sun and the moon will always rise again and slowly but surely, everyone gets better in the end.

The melody touched a spot in Ludwig's very being he had forgotten he had, a humane part he had almost given up on. Maybe it was a blessing or a curse, but humans always managed to stand up again. With no need of words, Feliciano was reminding him of that fact. No matter how many mistakes he made, Ludwig was alive. He was still human.

The duck's feathers gleamed under the vanishing sunlight, appearing white-like while the song reached its end. Perhaps it was because the instrument was strange to him, but Ludwig felt as if he had just peeked into another world. Feliciano's hidden world, more specifically.

"Did you like it?" He asked, unable to hide his nervousness. Had it been a normal duck, he wouldn't have been so keen on getting its approval, but alas, it was Ludwig the audience he wanted to enchant.

The duck stepped out of the water with its orange paws and boldly stated:

“Quack!”

Feliciano blinked once, then twice and then let out a loud laugh, clutching the *ghironda* with one of his hands and his stomach in the other. He spent some minutes like that, laughing and showering the duck with the beautiful sound of his voice. Ludwig looked around, as if he was trying to decide if this was offensive or not... Well, it was awkward, that was for sure.

“I’m sorry, I just... It was so anticlimactic, I don’t know what I expected.”

The duck ruffled its feathers in an angry gesture, but there were no clouds on the forest nor darkened plumage, so Feliciano knew he wasn’t actually angry. Embarrassed? Probably.

“Thank you for listening, Ludwig.” He said, pronouncing his name like it was a melody and the duck looked back at him, like he wanted to say something but decided to just let it go. Not that he could say anything, but it looked like it. Then, flapping its wings and getting even closer, he used his beak to softly touch the *ghironda* and then looked up at Feliciano. “Mhm? Do you want to know more about this?”

The duck nodded and sat on its butt, much to Feliciano’s amusement.

“They say a magician never reveals his secrets, but I can make an exception for Paperella.” Feliciano said, gaining a loud sigh from Ludwig’s part, a fact that made him giggle before gently patting the duck’s head. “This is a string instrument, even if it doesn’t look like it. The sound is produced by this crank when you turn it... See this wheel right here? When you turn the crank, it rubs against the strings.”

To demonstrate, he leaned towards the duck and played a long note so it could see how the wheel was controlled by the crank, although he couldn’t show him the strings since they were inside the wood body.

“It’s kinda like a violin bow. These are the keys, when touching them they press against the strings to change their pitch.” Ludwig nodded, eyes fixated on the instrument as he started to understand how it worked. So Ludwig was the type who liked small artifacts and how they worked? That was quite endearing to Feliciano, honestly. “It has a sound board and the cavity is hollow to make the vibration of the strings audible... Kinda like a guitar! Huh, it’s like a mix of many different instruments.”

Ludwig knew what guitars and violins were, so he could see the resemblance quite easily even if he had never played anything himself. Most of the time, his older brother hired musicians to entertain him, but they never let them get too close to Ludwig so all he could ever do was watch them. Being this close to an instrument was a first to him.

“Quack?”

“What is it?”

“Quack, quack.”

Feliciano took a moment to look at Ludwig, trying to decipher his quacks. It didn’t take too long since, for some reason, he felt as if he knew Ludwig for years. With a bright smile, he left the instrument next to them on top of the tablecloth and placed the duck on his lap, caressing its head. Thankfully, despite being embarrassed Ludwig didn’t run away this time.

“It was my father who gave it to me, but it’s a common instrument where I’m from. It’s called Unicornate Kingdom... Yes, like the unicorn. It’s our symbol, though I’ve never seen one. I used to think they were fake, but after coming here, I want to see a real unicorn now and cross it off my list of things I want to see before dying.” Ludwig tilted its head, giving a loud quack. “What else do I want to see? Mhm, good question. Perhaps a jewel with many colors reflecting on it? I read a story about it once.”

Ludwig frowned its duck face, thinking deeply about it until Feliciano shouted suddenly, which caused the duck to jump and raise its feathers in fright.

“Speaking of jewels! Today I visited the mines and I saw many red gemstones there. They called them magic stones because they never stop shining. Do you know anything about it?”

After being pacified with more pats, Ludwig shook his head, making Feliciano frown for a few moments as he dwelled on it.

“Maybe they formed after the curse was placed on you?”

That would explain why the former ruler of that land didn’t know that they existed. Ludwig also seemed to be deep in thought, but the moon was starting to peek through the horizon and, with that, he used his short legs to sprint towards the lake. It was a mere meter away, since they were having their picnic next to it, so he just jumped straight into the water and the light blinded once again Feliciano.

“Ahh, *cavolo!* ” He said, having to close his eyes. He would never get used to this, but if the night was coming, then it meant...

“That might be it. Their eternal light could also be because of the spell, some of its magic might have rubbed off on the mountain and its gemstones.”

A familiar and deep, manly voice came from the lake and Ludwig’s human figure appeared in place of Paperella, half submerged into the water while the light disappeared but... Well.

He was naked, of course. Ducks didn’t wear clothes, so the transformation didn’t include any garments. Feliciano covered his eyes once again, this time not because of a blinding light, but because of a blinding and huge...

“...!!”

This was a fact that Ludwig just realized, probably being too used to transforming alone and without worrying about covering himself. So now, they were both embarrassed and with faces as red as ripe tomatoes.

“I, I am terribly sorry, I did not mean to...!”

"No, no, it's okay, you can't help it!" Feliciano said with his hands still defending his eyes' purity. "I brought clothes with me... For you, I mean. I don't know if they will fit, but I, uh..., yeah."

Shyly pointing at the basket, Ludwig stepped out of the water as quickly as he could and searched for the clothes, unable to even verify if Feliciano was still covering his eyes. Too embarrassing! Magic was so inconvenient, honestly! Why couldn't the spell include clothes and stuff? Elizabeta and Roderich were kind enough to make clothes for him with spider silk and keep them to not let them get too dirty, but they were nowhere to be seen so Ludwig was now left to his own devices.

Inside the basket laid a white shirt, underwear and black trousers. They were quite big, at first glance Ludwig knew they wouldn't be that uncomfortable to wear. He didn't have much time to think about it though, since with each passing second he felt his dignity sink deeper and deeper into the ground, so he just put them on as fast as he could. However, he was having difficulties with the shirt's complex laces on the collar, something that managed to hurt his pride a little bit. He already knew Feliciano was from far away and that fashion could change a lot in fifty years, but he still had a hard time adjusting to it when he greatly appreciated his homeland's clothing. It didn't help that these and Feliciano's clothes seemed like commoner garments; in the end, Ludwig was still a noble who liked fancy and elegant things, he didn't know how he was supposed to tie a peasant shirt.

"Uhm, excuse me. I already finished fixing my appearance." He said, his R's as rough as always. "But I cannot seem to understand how this shirt works."

Peeping through his fingers, Feliciano stared at the blonde man before him and couldn't help but shy away once more. He already knew Ludwig was handsome, but the feeling of seeing him dressed in what he picked was something else, even if they were commoner clothes. It was true that a beautiful person could make even rags look gorgeous, huh. The man had brushed his hair with his hands, cleanly setting aside the blonde locks and allowing his sharp features to stand out with nothing to hide them. Handsome. Really, really handsome.

The bard nodded and finally stood up, shaking off the cake crumbs off his legs and walking towards Ludwig. They were both barefoot, so their steps were silent and light.

"You don't necessarily have to tie the strings, you can just leave them be." Feliciano said, smiling and reaching his hands towards the king's chest to hold the laces. Playing with them

around his fingers, he undid the clumsy knot Ludwig had made and straightened the white fabric with a vertical movement, caressing without knowing the other's torso. "It's more fashionable like that, I think."

And now he could clearly see Ludwig's chest. Oh, boy.

Noticing Feliciano's attentive gaze while Feliciano noticed Ludwig noticed, they both averted their eyes at the same time and the taller man tried to say something to break the awkwardness.

*"Danke."*

"What?"

"It means thank you in my mother tongue."

"Oh. I think it's the same language the villagers speak, though it's a bit different. Uhm, let me see... *Gern... Gern geschehen !*"

"Pft."

"H-huh? Did I say something wrong? Why are you laughing?"

Despite it being the correct translation for "you're welcome" Feliciano's pronunciation was clumsy and poor, unable to hide the melodious tone of his own mother tongue.

"No, sorry. You said it well, it is just that your pronunciation is incorrect."

"W-well, I'm a bard, not a scholar! I can't help it!" Feliciano pressed his lips together in a pout, his manly pride hurt. It wasn't his fault his tongue wasn't made for pronouncing such rough sounding words! Taking one step back, the brunet placed a hand on his own flushed cheeks, attempting to cool them down. "Can't you teach me?"

This surprised the former king but at the same time, he couldn't hide his enthusiasm at the possibility of teaching another person his language. To clear his throat and mask his feelings, he coughed softly and nodded as if he was doing Feliciano a favor. He probably was, but oh, well.

"What do you want to know?"

"I... I want to convey my feelings to someone."

Ludwig's expression hardened for a few moments, too short for Feliciano to notice since he was too busy brushing his brown hair with his fingers in a coy gesture as he tried to explain himself. The moonlight fell tenderly on his figure, his eyes beaming with shyness. He looked ethereal.

"It's funny, I don't think I even know who he is, I don't even remember his name, but he is special to me. He helped me through tough times, so it's only right I thank him. I... He's the person I like."

"You want to thank him in my language?" Ludwig asked, perhaps a bit too roughly.

Feliciano flinched, noticing the moon being obscured by dark clouds.

"Huh? Ludwig, why are you angry?"

"I am not angry." Ludwig answered, clearly very angry. However, once he noticed Feliciano's frightened expression, he stepped back and averted his eyes. Darn, he had to fix that temper of his. "I just do not understand why you would confess to another man in my mother tongue. He would not even understand."

He was still angry, but he tried his best to keep calm since he didn't want to scare Feliciano away who, despite his trembling hands, stayed by his side.

"You're right. I don't know why I would even think that." He said, flustered and a bit disappointed. Why would he have the idea of confessing in the language of a lost kingdom? Somehow, he felt like *he* would understand, but how? "I don't even know if he's real..."

The blonde man tilted his head just like the duck did, a sign of confusion and it made Feliciano giggle, cheering up a bit.

"I actually only met him in my dreams, which is why I can't remember him clearly. I just know I love him." He explained with a sense of longing, a feeling that always settled in his chest.

Ludwig's face softened, looking like he understood something and feeling embarrassed at his own unnecessary jealousy. He tried to say something, but he couldn't finish his sentence.

"You..."

"Hey, stop calling me 'you'! I have a name, you know?" Feliciano let out a sigh, changing the subject and sitting once again on the tablecloth, stretching out his legs in a carefree gesture. "I call you Ludwig, but you've never used my name once. Isn't that mean?"

He pouted and seemed to be hurt by Ludwig's carelessness, who was now embarrassed and nervous.

"O-oh, I, I am sorry, I..."

"Pfft! You look so flustered, Ludwig! It's okay, I'm just messing with you." He laughed out loud, crossing his legs as he stared at Ludwig with a strange gleam in his eyes. "Though it would be nice if you called my name."

Ludwig also wanted to use his name, to pronounce it and feel it in his lips like a melody, but... Was the Swan King worthy of it? He didn't want to use the prince's name. It felt as if it would break the illusion, but... Feliciano looked lonely under that perfect mask. Ludwig felt it clearly, able to see beyond that flawless and almost mechanical smile. It was so different to how he smiled in that fantastic dream realm. Was the real world so heartless that he couldn't even smile genuinely?

"I am sorry, Feliciano."

Ludwig had closed his eyes, the soft wind moving the white shirt's puffy sleeves with the lake behind him. A familiar sight, so familiar Feliciano felt his eyes fill with tears but unable

to even know why. He was happy, though. So happy he felt his tired body become as light as a feather.

A duck feather, if you will.

"It's okay, Ludwig. Can I still ask you to teach me your language? We still have some cake left, too." He said in a whisper, patting the spot next to him.

Ludwig's lips curled up in a smile.

"I cannot win against you."

—ξ ॐ θ —

It was barely two in the morning, last night they stayed until dawn came, but Feliciano was dozing off since he hadn't been sleeping these past days.

Sitting next to Ludwig on top of the tablecloth, his eyes were barely open while he answered with "*mhm*" and "*hm-hmph*" whatever the blonde man said.

"Are you tired?" Ludwig asked.

"No." Feliciano said, separating his lips and yawning like a whale.

The blonde man clutched the tablecloth under him, doing his best to not shout right there what he was thinking, though it was more or less something along the lines of "*er ist so verdammt süß.*"

"You should return to the village." Ludwig said as calmly as he could, contrary to his thoughts. "Sleeping is important."

"But I don't want to go... I like speaking with you, it's fun." The brunet answered, slurring his words while he was now practically using Ludwig to support himself and leaning onto him.

"You can barely keep your eyes open..."

"But I don't wanna leave."

"You can come tomorrow too." Since the forest allowed him to enter freely.

Feliciano shook his head slightly to show his disapproval, but practically ended up falling asleep on Ludwig's arms.

Ludwig couldn't do much now, since he didn't want to wake him up. He was sleeping so peacefully and his breathing was steady and soft, finally at ease.

"You careless bard..." He whispered, caressing the brown hair with a tenderness so great he seemed like he was afraid of breaking him with his touch. This was the first time they were this close, the first time he could feel his lover's warmth next to his. Dreams were never comparable to the real world, it seemed. Leaning towards the brunet, Ludwig kissed his forehead gently. "I cannot follow you in your dreams tonight. I am sorry, Feliciano."

Just then, a small glow appeared from in between the grass. She wore tulips in her hair and her uneven wings fluttered towards the pair.

"Elizabeta..."

"I will help you." She said, small hands on her chest. "He is the one, isn't he? The person you met here."

Ludwig nodded faintly with a desolate look on his face. With a bitter smile, he said:

"They were dreams to him and illusions to me, but he does not remember... Well, I never thought I would even meet him. I should be happy with just this, but it is more like a punishment to me."

The Tulip fairy placed her feet on Ludwig's shoulder, offering a warm and bright comfort.

"It's not a punishment. The spell works as intended. Your regret reached it, now it will allow you to break free, Lutz."

But the Swan King didn't believe her.

"Just help me keep him safe."

Elizabeta nodded, letting out a sigh. So stubborn...

Just like his brother.

Feliciano woke up in the morning at the entrance of the forest. His belongings rested by his side and he was covered with a white fabric made of spider silk. On top of it, the magical and glowing flowers had kept him warm and safe. This made him chuckle and whispered a small "danke."

—ξ⁹⁹⁹ξ—

Many days passed.

Feliciano visited the forest without fail every day to learn and speak with Ludwig and the other fairies, who wouldn't stop whispering amongst themselves. "Have you seen how much

"*that thing changed?*" was what they most talked about. Ludwig had become gentler, going as far as to allow the fairies into the lake while Feliciano played around and sang. During the day, he surprised the villagers with a perfect but archaic use of their language and helped them with many menial tasks, offering a hand and a song to aid them. During the night, though, he spoke with Ludwig for hours and hours and grew more attached to him as the moon traveled through the sky.

They were the best days he had ever experienced and he didn't want them to end.

He was now returning from pulling another all-nighter, since he wanted to teach Ludwig how to play the *ghironda*. With the instrument in hands, he was some meters away from the end of the forest.

It went pretty well despite the other's fingers being big and rough, not too fit to become a musician but just enough to have fun playing instruments. His smile was the best reward to Feliciano, who couldn't help but giggle when remembering how happy he looked when he played a beautiful sequence of notes.

He then wondered why that smile seemed so familiar, since he felt he saw it somewhere. In his dreams, maybe. In that lake and on his lover's face.

Suddenly, the sharp pain in his head made him stumble and the lack of rest only accentuated the uncomfortable feeling in his brain that began increasing the more he tried to keep himself together. His body felt fine, but his mind was foggy and exhausted, something he attributed to the fact he didn't sleep at all, but it was too strange. His eyelids were so heavy and his whole body was shutting down. He was tired, sure, but he didn't think it was enough to provoke such a reaction. So sudden too, it was as if he was forcibly being put to sleep. This already happened before and it was because of the same reason; thinking of the lover in his dreams, but this time it was even worse since he couldn't even compose himself.

"Fairy Prince?"

Gisela's voice took him out of his stupor, allowing him to not fall prey to the sudden sleepiness. With a mix of surprise and worry, the girl clutched the basket of fruits she carried.

"What are you doing over there?"

"I..."

Feliciano mumbled, the fog in his mind becoming too thick to even think properly. What was he doing there...? He knew it was important, but for some reason, he couldn't actually pinpoint anything. What day was it? Where was he? And why did he feel so terribly exhausted? Why did he feel like he was forgetting something so important it made his heart ache as if it was being pulled apart? Who was he looking for and what was his name?

"F-Fairy Prince!"

*Thud!*

He fell to his knees, the exit of the forest being mere centimeters away as if it was the gate to another world. He felt small and weak arms trying to help him, pulling him out of the shade while she screamed for help, but despite Feliciano being conscious, his body wouldn't respond, like it belonged to someone else. Like Feliciano was watching the scene unfold as an outsider.

Soon, many other villagers came to their aid once the small girl's cries were heard and carried the bard outside the forest, but no matter what they tried, he wouldn't wake up and his body was so heavy four people had to carry it. It was as if the forest's claws didn't want him to leave. They couldn't even place him in anything comfortable, so they had to leave him on the ground.

"It's so strange. It isn't like anything we saw before." Someone said, increasingly worried.

Other voices followed, discussing what to do.

"It's the forest's curse, isn't it?"

"It probably is, but..."

"Is it different because he's an outsider?"

"Whatever it is, I don't want him here!"

"Liselotte!"

"What? We don't know if this type of curse is dangerous to other people. I don't want this foreigner in the village, we even warned him about the forest, didn't we? This is all his own doing!"

Despite the villagers' protests, some of them recognized that the woman, Liselotte, had a point. Feliciano had to agree; he knew there was an actual spell placed on the inhabitants of the forest, he knew magic was real and he knew someone like him could be susceptible to it, yet he still visited every day without fail, not caring about his own wellbeing. This was just... The consequences of his own actions. They had the right to not want to deal with it, since at the end of the day he still was an outsider. He didn't belong here, or anywhere, actually.

"Will you shut your wrinkly mouth, Liselotte? I'm tired of hearing you whine."

A female voice rang through the villagers and Hildegard made an appearance, hands on her waist and a stern expression on her face.

"A person is hurt and all you can think of is saving your own skin! Aren't you ashamed?" She shouted, a bit too angry. "A person who helped us all, may I remind you. What shameful people you are, accepting another's help but refusing to help them back!"

The villagers lowered their heads, unable to answer to that, but Liselotte tried to stand her ground.

"This is his own doing! We warned him about going into the forest, what if he brings a curse with him? What will happen then? Our children might be harmed!" She said, pointing at a frightened Gisela who stood close by Feliciano's side. Her eyes were teary and she was shaking, a sight that made Hildegard waver. "Do you think I want another crazyman to take care of? If you're so worried about this outsider, take care of him yourself!"

The woman clenched her fist and shook the dust off her dress, starting to walk away with a dignified look on her face. Some of the other villagers followed her while others stood behind. One of them was Rainer, her own son. He didn't look like the shy and timid young man of before.

"Rainer? What are you doing? Let's get out of here!"

"No."

"What?"

"I said no, mother. Didn't you teach me to never leave a person in need behind? Would you have left grandfather to rot?"

Liselotte stared at her son for a few seconds and then her face contorted in anger once she understood what he meant.

"That was different, your grandfather... He was family. This bard is a stranger." She mumbled, red in the face with fury. "If you don't apologize for your insolence, don't even think about returning home."

But Rainer stopped listening to her and just turned towards Hildegard, who couldn't help but smile.

"We need to get him to a more comfortable place."

Liselotte stormed off with some of the villagers following her, but many of them stayed behind to help out. Discussing what to do, some of them offered to bring some incense to burn and chase away whatever evil spirit had entered the prince's body while others spoke about other ways of purging the evil curse, but none of them could actually agree to do anything. Gisela sobbed silently and her mother hugged her tight, comforting her and reassuring her. However, a strange voice had spoken, appearing out of nowhere.

"That won't work." He said. "He isn't cursed nor are there any evil spirits lurking around him."

Like a sudden shadow rising from the dark, a hooded man with a strong British accent walked through the villagers. As he walked, he made tingling sounds and once he raised his hand, the many vials and pouches full of herbs and liquids revealed he was a traveling herbalist. On his right hand rested a ring with a red gemstone that glowed menacingly, but none of the villagers could say anything as a sudden fear had overcome them. None of them knew why, it was an instinctive fear so great none of them could even dare to look at the stranger. He seemed used to it, since he just shrugged as he made his way to the unconscious body, but a small child had stood between them. A trembling, crying child who had a determined gleam in her eyes.

Only Gisela spoke up, her childish and shaky voice filled with worry. Amidst her tears, he stood between Feliciano and the hooded figure, who was taken aback.

“I will pay you, I will pay you! Just, please... Please, save the Fairy Prince!”

## Chapter End Notes

- \* The song that Feliciano played is Day by Day, by Andrey Vinogradov. It's a beautiful song played in a ghironda/hurdy-gurdy, please check it out! (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLxaCWGTEVo>)
- \* Cavolo: Holy smoke! (though it literally means cabbage)
- \* Danke: Thank you
- \* Gern geschehen: You're welcome
- \* Er ist so verdammt süß: He's so damn cute.
- \* For reference, Schwanenberg and Unicornate Kingdom are both inspired by the 1600's while Ludwig's kingdom is inspired by the 1800's, so both Feliciano and the other villagers wear renaissance inspired clothes (not medieval, though I also yoinked some medieval elements!), which is why Ludwig has no clue how to properly dress with those pirate shirts with laces on the collar and puffy sleeves.

This is also because Ludwig II of Bavaria reigned around 1860 and I wanted to keep that stiff elegance for my mental image of our Ludwig's childhood years. However, in the original Swan Lake ballet's costumes (or at least the one I watched IRL and the ones from Royal Opera House, the one YouTube channel I watch religiously) are more medieval and even Elizabethan inspired. Since historic fashion is another interest of mine, I had to do more research about this even if at the end of the day this is a written fantasy story and visuals aren't that heavy. Nonetheless, if this piece of information helps you visualize the story better, then that's all I need!

So, to make it short, Schwanenberg and Feliciano are 1600's Elizabethan/Renaissance era inspired and Ludwig is 1800's Victorian era inspired.

## Entrance of the Guests & Waltz

### Chapter Notes

This is one of the longest chapters I've written so far and I even split it, so... Well, consider this a treat from my part! ( '▽' )

Once I finish writing Swan King, since I believe there will be three more chapters and some extras, I'm thinking of opening Writing Comissions, but I don't know if they'll sell well so I shall look more into it. Let me know if one of you would be interested. (。 。 )

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The hooded man stared at the child for a solid minute, both green gazes colliding in what felt like a battle of wills and no one actually moved or even breathed until finally, he sighed and broke the silence, annoyed.

"What do you take me for? I won't take a little girl's money!" He said while being stared at by the villagers like they actually expected him to ask for gold or something like that. "I'll help just because I feel like it, don't misunderstand me. Now move."

Gisela, still a little bit nervous and anxious, nodded and took some steps back in which her mother finally hugged her and pulled her close, hands trembling like a leaf. The hooded man rolled his eyes and kneeled next to Feliciano, inspecting him with attentive eyes.

"... Huh?" He muttered, frowning his thick eyebrows as he kept inspecting the unconscious man. "What is this...? Mhm, I'll ask once he wakes up. For now..."

With his right hand, he checked the pulse and his body temperature and mumbled in some strange language under his breath. Out of all the vials and bottles that hung on his hips, he chose two of them and the herbs inside he examined in total silence.

"Bring me water, a piece of cloth and white bread. And something sharp." He demanded, his fingers pressing the herbs. Rainer, breaking out of his stupor, nodded and left to fetch freshwater while the other villagers brought the other items the herbalist had requested. He

seemed uninterested, but due to the careful way he treated the unconscious man and how confident his movements were, it was obvious he was an experienced healer. Once the villagers brought him all he needed, he put the herbs inside the bucket full of freshwater and sank his right hand inside it; the ruby ring glowed softly as he pressed the leaves against each other inside the water and Gisela could've swore she saw a faint black smoke come out of it, but she couldn't ask since she was too worried about what was going to happen.

With the cloth in his other hand, he drenched it in the water and put it on Feliciano's forehead just like that and then stood up, cutting some of the white bread to eat it while he seemed to finish his treatment, but when noticing the puzzled look on the villager's faces, he said:

“What? I’m starving.”

“Huh? That’s it? You’re not going to, uh, I don’t know, feed him some herbs?” Rainer asked, clearly suspicious and considering maybe it wasn’t the best idea to let a total stranger deal with the situation. From behind him, Edith placed her hands on his shoulders and gave the herbalist a glare.

“What if he’s a swindler? Rai, stand back, he might be dangerous.”

“Of course I’m not a swindler! I would’ve asked for money if I was.” The hooded man defended himself, offended. “I just helped this guy, that’s all!”

“You did? How? You only put a drenched cloth on his forehead!”

“You wouldn’t understand, you are just a village girl. You can’t expect to understand what a herbalist does.”

“Is that so? Then I will show you what a village girl can do!”

“Eek, stay away, woman!”

“Edith, please put the pickaxe down!”

“*Cosa sta succedendo...?*”

“Help me! This crazy woman is trying to attack me- oh, you’re awake.”

“How dare you care me a crazy wom- wait, Feliciano is awake?”

“Yeah, how dare you call her a crazy wom- what? He’s awake?”

“H-he’s awake!” Gisela was the one who announced it to all, practically clinging to the bard as he slowly adjusted himself, unable to discern if this was a dream or reality.

The cloth had fallen from his forehead, but he was indeed awake. His body still felt heavy and exhausted, but his mind was getting clearer with each second that passed. Now the villagers weren't trying to pick a fight with the herbalist and instead shifted their attention to the prince. They all started to speak, some worried and some relieved while Gisela tried to make them step back and give Feliciano space, but his eyes were fixated on the hooded figure that was starting to walk away, munching on the bread.

"Wait! You... You helped me, didn't you?" He said, clenching the cloth between his hands. He could feel some leaves of unknown herbs clinging to the fabric. "T-thank you, I will repay you."

The herbalist looked behind him, face obscured but visible enough to show a gleam of interest he tried to conceal.

"I don't need your thanks or anything like that, keep it to yourself." He said bluntly, fixing his hood to make sure it didn't come off. However, a loud growl made everyone stop right there and look at him; his stomach didn't lie and now his secret had been exposed to everyone. The villagers started to whisper amongst themselves while the herbalist felt his face burn in both anger and embarrassment.

"He's hungry..."

"Yep, he's hungry."

"One piece of bread isn't enough if he's that hungry."

Feliciano covered his mouth with one of his hands, but it was futile; his laughing was too obvious. Standing up with Hildegard's help, he spoke with some of the villagers to assure them he would deal with this and they could go on with their day and finally looked back at the herbalist with a warm smile on his lips.

"I'm Feliciano. As a token of gratitude, I would like to invite you to eat something. What is your name?"

"That is... That is the Dreamer's Herb!" Gisela said, eyes wide while the rest of fried potatoes rested on her cheeks, but she was too focused to even realize. "Mutti usually uses it to make relaxing herbal tea, right?"

The herbalist smirked, allowing the child to inspect the vials more closely. Hildegard patted her daughter's hair and nodded, but she seemed strangely silent and taciturn.

"Yes, I usually drink it at night to help myself sleep."

"It's the common use indeed. However, once you mix it with this one right here, called Red Rosemary, it can awaken even sleeping dragons." The herbalist said, raising one of the small bottles that had tiny red and green leaves inside. With his other hand, he took a bite of the breakfast in front of him and let out a sigh of relief, wondering if it would be too early to ask for some ale. The potatoes and vegetables reminded him of a dish his mother used to make for him, so he was happily enjoying the free meal.

"Wow... Why would someone want to awaken a dragon?"

"They're not so bad, you just have to show off something pretty and they'll be no better than dogs." His thick eyebrows were raised as if he was showing off and wanted some compliments shot his way, but when he only received giggles he sighed and rolled his eyes. Whatever. "So, your name is Feliciano?"

Pointing with his fork, the hooded man that was no longer hooded spoke to the bard sitting right across the table. They were at Hildegard's house who had agreed to make breakfast, but on the condition there would be no magic or anything like that. She had recognized what the blonde man had done; it was magic. She wanted to have nothing with it, so she made both men promise there would be none of it.

"Yes, and you're Arturo, right? Is that how you pronounce it?"

"No, I'm Arthur, it's *aah-thuh*."

"Aah... *Aadar*?"

"No, you have to... Ugh, whatever." He nailed down his fork, clearly exasperated, and took another bite of the ham, mixing it with the eggs and potatoes. "And these are Hildegard and..."

"Gisela!"

"Yeah, that. It's a nice name." With a whispering voice he added that last part, munching on his food with simple table manners, different from Gisela's carefree eating gestures and Feliciano's ingrained elegance.

Hildegard looked at them with a complicated look on her face, unable to even mutter anything, but Arthur seemed more curious about the bard, who he wouldn't stop looking at. Her daughter was the total opposite, though.

"Are you a traveler as well, mister magician? If you are, then you have to taste more than just this *bauernfrühstück*, here we have a lot of pretty things!"

"No, I... Uh, well, I suppose I am a traveler, but I don't need any pretty things. I have some unfinished business I need to take care of here, that's all."

"Unfinished business?" Feliciano asked, tilting his head.

Arthur nodded, staring at Feliciano for a few seconds as his green eyes lighted up with a strange glow in them.

"Business in the forest, more specifically. There's a beast I have to take care of."

And just like that, the whole table went silent.

"... What?" Arthur asked, frowning.

Gisela had covered her mouth with her two small hands while Hildegard was looking at Arthur like he was a madman. He probably was, but she didn't want to anger a man who could wield magic, so she only placed her hands on the table and took a few moments to collect her thoughts. Feliciano on the other hand had become as pale as a sheet of paper and once he heard the woman speak, he realized they both reached the same conclusion.

"Are you talking about the cursed beast that dwells in the lake?"

“Exactly!” Arthur said, beaming with excitement. However, when he realized there was no way a villager would know the beast itself, he blinked twice and then put the fork down, clearly confused. “Wait, how do you know that? No one is supposed to enter the lake.”

Gisela stood up without needing anyone to tell her and she hurriedly ran towards her room. Hildegard just sighed, feeling already tired and it wasn’t even noon yet. The small girl returned with the same storybook she showed Feliciano before and gave it to Arthur with a mix of excitement and nervousness in her still dirty face, which her mother promptly cleaned with a handchierkief.

“When my mother’s generation restored the ruined buildings to settle here, they found some old books left by the people who used to live in Schwanenberg. One of the books was this one; it depicts many folktales about the place, most of which surround a lake inside the forest, but no one ever actually saw it since every person who enters the woods becomes disoriented and lost. Almost like a curse.” She explained, caressing the cheeks of her daughter while Arthur turned the pages of the book, looking at the illustrations in silence. “We never let anyone go near the forest, since it drives them mad and weak so we’ve never actually seen the ‘monster’ that lives there, but we know it exists. We sometimes find animal carcasses on the entrance of the forest, though in the last few years they have become less and less common. They always look like they’ve been massacred by a beast of big claws and it was enough to make us promise we would never let anyone near it... That is, until Feliciano got in.”

Hildegard now looked at Feliciano with a stern expression. Angry, even. He could notice there was a fury hidden in her eyes, a fury she did her best to quell since her daughter was still there. She considered telling her to go play outside, but she decided against it since this was also something the child had to hear.

“I probably should’ve been more clear with you, young man. I never specified the dangers of the forest, which is why you had the bright idea of entering anyways. I want to make something clear; I will not stand by and watch as you become a danger to my daughter. If you want to enter the woods and get killed I don’t care, but in doing so you are setting a bad example to the children who are already curious about that godforsaken lake. We gave you food and shelter without asking for the gold it cost us, and yet there you are ignoring our warnings and concerns... And the worst of all, you made my daughter lie to me. Did you think I wouldn’t notice? Did you think I’m a stupid and ignorant village woman who can’t tell where the so-called bardic traveler runs off every night?”

Feliciano was silent, having looked away from the furious mother. What else could he say? She was right, everyone knew that. Why did he even think his lies wouldn't be found out? This was a tight-knit community, even if there were some discussions here and there. With a face as pale as snow and a body as cold as ice, he could only wait for the words to keep hitting him.

“*M-mutti*, no, please, don’t get angry, it was my fault, I-”

“Silence, Gisela. I am angry at you, but you are just a child. It wasn’t your fault, I should’ve known you shouldn’t have gotten exposed to this outsider’s words.” She sighed, staring daggers at the stiff and quiet man in front of her. He might look young, but she knew he was old enough to become unable to blame his naivety for his actions. “Don’t get me wrong, Feliciano. I think you are a good man, but you clearly think of all of this like it is a mere game. An entertainment, even, like you think you aren’t really here with us. I wanted to ignore it since I thought it was just a custom of your homeland or something, but this reckless way you detach yourself from reality is not something I will allow near my daughter. You can do whatever you want, I am not your mother and I don’t want to be, but you have to understand that what you do has consequences, and those consequences not only affect you, but those around you too. Did you think about us when we found your unconscious body? What if it was a corpse? What if you brought whatever curse with you and infected us too with it? Did you ever think about any of those things or were you too drunk on adventure and fantasy? Whatever it is, I am done with you. I want you out of my house the moment you finish eating this ‘*delicious kindness*.’ Never get close to me or my daughter again. I won’t be this kind anymore.”

The woman stood up and she suddenly looked more of a royal than anyone Feliciano ever saw before. With her posture as straight and tall as a tree, her glare was unwavering and capable of stealing the breath of anyone who had insulted her, but she didn’t need to use violence to make them understand that. A queen like this fortified by the worry and care of her loved ones was fearsome. Too fearsome for the cowardly and weak bard that had realized he had ruined everything with his own stupidity, unable to even mutter a word to defend himself. Hildegard dragged a crying Gisela with her and they left the dining room, disappearing into one of the rooms. It was probably to have a talk with the girl, to explain to her what happened and why Feliciano was banished from seeing her.

Feliciano thought it was for the best. Once he heard everything Hildegard told him, it was as if he finally returned to the real world, albeit like he was aggressively pushed into it. It was something he needed, even after fainting and feeling as if he had become separated from his body, he still believed everything was good and nice, but now he knew it wasn’t. Even when he wasn’t sleeping, he was still lost in his fantasies and had hurt someone who had reached a hand to him.

As for Arthur... Well, Arthur felt like he wanted to disappear, this was so damn awkward, he couldn't even ask anything about the book, plus he wasn't a people person and he barely knew how to interact with them without looking like a hermit, which he was, so after a few seconds of silence he finally spoke, trying to make a joke:

“So, you’re kinda ruined now, huh. Don’t worry, they don’t know anything, this book is crap and is not even mildly accurate.” He started, trying to smile but suddenly, Feliciano broke in tears, much to his surprise. Without knowing what to do, the herbalist put a hand on the other’s shoulder, nervously. “H-hey...! Don’t cry, I’m sorry! It’s okay, mate. It’s not like you wanted to enter the forest, I bet you got confused or something, that spell was rubbish, though I don’t know why it caused you to faint.”

The tears wouldn’t stop and the small sobs the bard let out were both heartbreakingly sad and a bit funny to Arthur, who couldn’t quite understand why he would be so sad over the words a mere villager would say, but he still tried to comfort him.

“Spell...?”

“Yeah, the spell to stop anyone from entering the lake. It’s not supposed to make you crazy, I guess time has ruined it or something like that.” He whispered that last part, thinking about something but then deciding to “So it’s not your fault, okay? It’s the bloody spell that doesn’t do its job, ugh, I was a fool to think those fairies could maintain it, they never liked to work...”

“Wait... D-do you know the fairies?” Feliciano asked, his crying stopping for a few moments and he looked at Arthur with wet cheeks and reddened eyes painted with suspicion.

“Of course I do! I was raised by them- wait, how do YOU know about the fairies?”

Now it was Arthur who was dumbfounded and suspicious and for a moment they both looked at each other, trying to discern if they were telling the truth, but amidst the tears and exhaustion Feliciano was the first to give in and spill the beans.

“I... I reached the lake. They told me everything. About the curse, the lake itself and... About the Swan King.”

Arthur’s expression hardened but finally sighed, closing the storybook and leaving it on the table.

“That explains some things...” He muttered, examining once again the bard up and down. “We should probably go and speak with them in person. If you are really able to reach the lake, then I want to see it myself.”

Feliciano felt strangely relieved, probably because he cried a bit and now he was closer and closer to discovering what really happened.

“But first... I want to sleep.”

...

“What?”

“Sleep, you know. I’ve been traveling for many weeks and the last time I slept was like three days ago, I’m kinda dying over here.” Arthur confessed, taking one last bite of the free food he had been given. “I’m fine with just sleeping on the ground, I just need to sleep.”

Once Feliciano inspected the blonde man more closely, he noticed the dark circles under his eyes were dreadfully big and he actually feared he would fall asleep right there, so the brunet just nodded and stood up, offering his help.

“I don’t need your help!” Arthur said angrily, but after thinking it over again, he looked away and accepted. “... Well, who cares. Do whatever you want.”

With a slight giggle, Feliciano extended a hand, being reminded of his older brother. Arthur looked at the bard for a few moments with a mix of strange feelings in his chest, like this was the first time in years he had been offered a helping hand. It probably was.

“I know a really good place to take a nap.”

Arthur took a deep breath, since walking through this difficult terrain was putting a toll on his already small body even if he had rested until evening. Feliciano on the other hand seemed to be doing just fine, a fact that really offended the blond who had hidden himself once again in his hood.

"You... How can you walk through all this?"

"Hm? Uh, I don't know, I just... Walk."

"Oh my, now are you going to tell me to just, just breathe?"

That vulgar way of speaking was certainly a first to Feliciano, whose whole life had been governed by aristocratic manners and poise. He couldn't help but feel a bit intrigued by it, though, just like he felt curious about the lives of the villagers... Ah, thinking about it was depressing him again, so he shook his head in an attempt to clear his thoughts. He pressed his fingers against the trunk of one of the trees and let out a sigh. The tree, upon being touched, seemed to raise its branches so faintly Feliciano didn't notice. It offered a clear pathway to them, a fact that made Arthur shout:

"You...! How did you do that?"

"Huh? Do what?"

"That!" He pointed at the tree, but Feliciano didn't see anything wrong with it and it caused Arthur to groan. "Ah, you piss me off! How are you even alive if you're this clueless?"

He honestly didn't know, it was something that his brother often asked him, but it always ended with a "*it's probably because I protect you all the time!*" Ah, his brother... He always seemed annoyed but he never stopped looking out for him. The homesickness was hitting hard, honestly, and after getting punched by reality he didn't feel like he was worthy of being in that place. Thankfully, his thoughts were interrupted by Arthur, who had raised his right hand; the ring he wore had been glowing for ten minutes now ever since they had entered the forest, serving as a lamp, but the glow was starting to wear off.

“Oh, come on, I fed you enough energy to last for another week, why are you turning off?” Arthur spoke towards the ring, but of course it didn’t answer. “Hey! I’m talking to you!”

That herbalist was really weird, but Feliciano assumed it was because he was also a magician. No, that word didn’t fit him, he was more like...

A sorcerer.

A sorcerer who knew the forest, who was raised in it and who knew the real story behind the Swan King’s legend. A man who wielded magic and was friends with fairies, magical creatures.

Not any sorcerer, but the sorcerer from the legends, the man who had cursed the vain king... No, the man who cursed Ludwig.

This realization hit Feliciano like icy water and he wondered why it took him so long to put the pieces together. The fairytale might’ve painted the sorcerer in a good light, but Feliciano could never trust one side of the story only, especially after meeting Ludwig and after hearing how Arthur’s unfinished business was “taking care of the beast.”

Feeling like all his blood had been drained, Feliciano stumbled on a tree root and fell backwards, his legs giving in. The fact that their only source of light was steadily decreasing didn’t help, the few rays of light left barely reached them and the ominous red light was no longer warm or comforting to him.

“Jeez, you really are clumsy, aren’t you?” Arthur said, reaching a hand towards the brunet, whose mind stopped working and could only think the herbalist was here to harm the man he had met in that lake.

Was the curse not enough that he had decided to finally finish the job? It had been fifty years, but Arthur looked like he was in his early twenties, it probably was a magic spell to disguise his real age. Maybe to sorcerers it seemed like only a few months and he was just returning from a stroll, finally deciding to get rid of the parasites that infected his home, but... But Ludwig wasn’t a parasite! Feliciano didn’t want him to get hurt, and in his eyes Arthur was

the person who was going to hurt him, so he couldn't bring himself to accept that hand, the hand that wore that eerie ring with a red gemstone so similar to the ones he had seen in the mines. From that same ring a black smoke started to pour out and it seemed to worsen his state of mind.

"What? Did you hurt yourself so badly you can't even speak?" Arthur smirked at his own joke, but he noticed Feliciano was trembling and this worried him. Leaning towards him, he spoke again, not noticing the smoke starting to surround him and Feliciano, whose primitive instincts screamed that smoke was dangerous and he had to run, but the fear was making him unable to even breathe properly. "Hey, are you okay?"

The smoke, invisible to Arthur, was pressing against Feliciano's throat and he swore he heard a deep man's voice speak to him inside his head.

"My, my, what do we have here? How interesting, it's the first time I've seen a child like this..." The strange voice said, chuckling with an inhuman tone. "Not even *mon* Arthur is blessed like you are, but is this even a blessing? To me it's more like the wicked prank of a mischievous fey, I bet this has brought you so many problems... If I hadn't pacted with him, I would've wanted you instead. I just can't resist cute mortals who reek of great misfortune."

The voice sent a shiver down Feliciano's spine and he knew this wasn't a mere magical being. No, it was something even crueler and more dangerous than a simple fairy. This was...

"Hey! Stop bullying Feli or I will, like, smack you in that ugly face you have!"

All of the sudden, Feliks had appeared with a sparkle accompanying him and he practically kicked Arthur's hand away, fluttering his wings like he was a brave knight fighting a dragon. He was followed by three other fairies, all of which had made a human... er, fairy wall to protect Feliciano from that stranger. Roderich, despite not being fit to fight, spread his long wings as if it could even help. Elizabeta, on the other hand, kept herself as steady as she could in the air while holding a thistle flower in her hands, a flower that could be used as a knife due to how sharp its prickles were.

"Stay away, you turdsickle!" She roared, threatening the sorcerer with her flower sword.

The whole commotion seemed to chase away the smoke as it disappeared without a trace once the Rue fairy had descended towards Feliciano's level. Tolys checked if he had any fever or injuries and finally sighed.

"He's alright! He's just spooked." He explained, turning towards the bard. "Feliciano, it's okay, we can chase that human away."

Arthur could just wave a hand and invoke a gust of wind that could easily sweep the four fairies away, but he didn't. Instead he just looked at the small creatures and sighed, revealing his face and pulling the hood off his head.

"I'm not a human, don't insult me that way, Tolys." He said, apparently annoyed, but once he saw how the expression of the fairies changed from anger to surprise, he smiled gently. "It's me, you fools. I'm back."

Elizabeta's flower sword fell from her hands as tears filled her eyes, which were fixated on the sorcerer's face like it was a sight she almost had forgotten. Feliks was the fastest, though, and he had already flown to clutch onto the herbalist.

"Arthur! It really is you! I totes didn't recognize you, why were you wearing that ugly hood?" He demanded to know, but his trembling voice revealed the Poppy Fairy was on the verge of tears as well. "Ughh, you've gotten so tall! Why can't I be, like, as tall as you?"

The Tulip fairy's wings gave in without her realizing and thankfully Arthur was able to react, catching her with both his hands.

"Hey! Why do you still try to fly for so long? One of these days you'll fall to the ground and smack your head, you... How did you call me? Turdsickle?" However, Arthur wasn't angry and just gave the small fairy a smile. Elizabeta chuckled and her usually feminine and soft voice was nowhere to be seen, instead, she loudly argued how she thought he was an invader she had to fight off. Roderich just sighed once he realized there was no danger and flew right next to her. "Yeah, right."

"I told you, Eliza, to think before acting. What if you injured Arthur?"

“But you were totes trying to protect Feli too, didn’t you, Rod? Or maybe you were, like, trying to look all brave in front of Eliza?”

“... I am speaking with Eliza, not with you, Feliks.”

“You guys haven’t changed at all, that’s a bit embarrassing, honestly.” Arthur interrupted, letting out a chuckle. The scene was almost like a family reunion, like the youngest sibling had come home at last. “The only invader here is that idiot right there, but he fell and hit his head, it seems.”

Once the smoke had disappeared, Feliciano felt clear-headed again and he noticed they were looking at him. Tolys was still by his side checking on him and his faint golden glow was calming his nerves. Once he finally composed himself, he leaned on the tree and stood up, trying to understand what was happening until he remembered what Arthur had mentioned.

“No, I’m fine, I just... I was a bit surprised. I never thought I would meet a man who was raised by fairies.”

“Well, I told you, didn’t I? This is my home, sooner or later I would have returned.”

“Your home...” Feliciano mumbled, feeling his chest tighten. “Are you the sorcerer from the legend?”

Arthur looked away, seeming embarrassed but proud at the same time.

“Yeah, I suppose. The fairytale omits a lot of details, but yeah, that’s me.”

His suspicions were right. Despite being able to keep himself steady, Feliciano was still uneasy. He saw how deep the affection the fairies had for Arthur ran, he saw how Tolys had joined them and kept repeating how tiring it was for him without Arthur around, how much everyone missed him and Feliciano saw how that man was more than just an “evil sorcerer” just like Ludwig was more than the vain king he had been depicted as.

“You said you have to take care of the beast.” He said, feeling guilty for ruining the joyful scene, but he couldn’t keep it in anymore. “Are you referring to Ludwig?”

Arthur's smile vanished and the fairies stopped speaking and looked at the sorcerer, the bells twinkling no more.

"You've met with the beast, huh."

"He's not a beast!"

"Oh, he's not? Then he's a monster instead. Or perhaps a monstrosity is the better word?" Arthur chuckled once again, but this time there was no warmth or gentleness in his face. He wasn't angry either, it was more like disdain. Contempt. Leaving Elizabeta on one of his shoulders, he took a step towards the brunet and raised his chin, staring at him. "So it's true you reached the lake... I suppose you are the pure soul that can break the curse. How vexing, I shouldn't have added that part to the spell, but then again, you can't curse someone unless you also concoct a way to break it. I just chose that condition to screw him over, since there are no things like pure souls... Or that's what I thought until now."

Arthur sighed, increasingly annoyed, and fixed his robe with his right hand.

"I would say I don't believe you, but the fairies trust you enough to protect you and you are here, inside my domain, so it must be true. You got entangled in this whole mess because of me, sorry, mate. I was inexperienced with magic and the spell I placed is pure crap. Don't worry though, I will resolve everything now."

"Resolve?"

"Yeah, it will be quick. In my travels I trained my magic, I even made a pact with a fiend. I'm not the useless boy I was back then, I can just kill the beast and free the forest."

Kill the beast.

"No!" Feliciano roared, his heart beating so loud he could almost hear it in his ears. "You can't kill him! He's not a beast nor a monster. He changed!"

"He... Changed?"

"Yeah! I don't know what he was like when you cursed him, but the Ludwig I met is a kind man who repented enough. You don't need to kill him! If we break the spell, I'm sure..."

But he was interrupted by Arthur's cold laughter, something that made the fairies fly away from him in surprise. He placed a hand on his stomach, a sign that he was laughing so hard it was starting to hurt, and it took him a good few minutes to compose himself, minutes that Feliciano used to collect his thoughts, but he felt too nervous.

"He changed, you say? That's hilarious! Instead of a bard, you should become a jester, that was pure gold!" He said, the vials clinking against each other as he moved closer and closer to Feliciano. With a terrifying and menacing smile, he was now mere centimeters away from the other man. "Even the fairytale explained it, albeit poorly; he's a damn murderer. He won't change. He's a monster and he has to die. You are just falling prey to his lies."

Once again, the ring began to glow eerily and the faint smoke began to spread, gaining a gasp of fear from Feliciano, but this time he did his best to not be intimidated by it.

"It's been fifty years! I'm sure there is more to the story than..."

"Shut up!" Arthur demanded, now practically clutching the brunet's arms. "You really don't know anything, do you?"

The smoke clouded Feliciano's vision and with that, he felt that familiar and invasive fear once again, but now he knew it wasn't his own fear, so he tried to keep himself grounded. It didn't work, obviously, and he started to hear that same demonic voice in his head. The fairies began to look even more nervous, sensing something dirty in the air, but because they were trying to mediate between Feliciano and Arthur, none of them could investigate what was that sudden darkness that weighed them down.

"You're hurting me..."

"Why are you even taking his side? You are friends with the fairies, right? Then you must've seen how awful he is with them...!"

"A-actually..." A soft, bell-like voice spoke, which made Arthur look at it. It was Tolys, the Rue Fairy and the one known for avoiding most conflict and getting pushed around by others. Now, however, he was speaking up, a fact that stunned the blond and with that, the smoke disappeared. "Uhm, Feliciano is right. Ludwig has changed."

The other fairies followed, corroborating the story. Elizabeta coughed and Feliks looked around in fear, clutching Tolys' arm as he tried to speak normally.

“Yeah, like, ever since Feli started to come every night he isn’t that mean to us anymore. Maybe it’s the *pasteris*?”

“It’s ‘pastries.’ But yes, I agree with Feliks.”

Roderich had joined too, something surprising in itself since he never liked to bother with these mundane topics; he also looked around, glasses sliding down his nose but not finding anything strange. Finally, Elizabeta lifted herself off the ground with a bit of difficulty, to which Arthur reacted by stepping back and offering the palm of his hands as a place she could step in, something which he accepted with a nostalgic smile.

“Arthur, I... I genuinely think the spell can be broken.” She said in a low voice. “You placed it not only to punish him, but to make him repent... And he did. It’s been fifty years, which may not seem that long to us, but to him it has been a lifetime of guilt and regret. The forest is slowly healing too, we can... We can go back to how things were.”

Arthur stopped breathing for a second, the look in Elizabeta’s eyes managing to tighten his heart. He placed her on the ground as gently as ever and for a moment Feliciano thought this was it, the moment everything could be resolved... Until he noticed the sorcerer tremble with fury.

“I shouldn’t have left. Now all of you are being tricked by that monster.”

It wasn’t enough.

“I’ll check by myself. That beast has crossed the line, how dare he pretend to be friends with you? After all he’s done...!” Arthur closed his eyes for a few seconds, the smoke surrounding him so slightly none of them noticed until the blonde man looked at Feliciano, eyes now gleaming in red. “And you! I will let you see his true colours.”

Without expecting any response, Arthur pushed Feliciano away and started to stroll through the forest, his anger palpable. Feliciano tried to stop him, since he feared what would happen if those two met, but the sorcerer wouldn’t budge no matter what he said. The fairies rushed to their side, trying to speak with Arthur as well, but nothing worked and none of them

wanted to do him any harm. The sorcerer mumbled something, a spell, and suddenly the black smoke had surrounded his legs, giving him a faster speed. Finally, Arthur could see the light at the end of the woods and recognized it as the lake, which made him start to run towards him even if he stumbled in the way. Feliciano followed closely behind while the branches let him in, moving out of his way, but he wasn't fast enough.

The sorcerer had returned home and he had seen the beast standing right in the middle of it.



Ludwig had been waiting. That was all he did, honestly. He waited for the day to pass, he waited for the moon to rise and he waited for the moment he would become a duck again. This routine went for so many years he had almost forgotten what else he did when he was a normal human.

He just swam around the lake, waiting, or he sometimes walked through the woods. Sometimes a fairy would fly past him, but he never paid them any mind. Sometimes he would hunt some animals that were getting too cocky and dangerous and he often left them in the entrance of the forest near the village, as a gift to the people he didn't know but he cared for.

It was a silly reasoning, but he still believed this was his land. He sometimes caught a glimpse of a villager walking dangerously close, which is why he knew Schwanenberg had become lively again. Even if they were not his people, they lived in his ruined kingdom and he felt the need to look after them, albeit in his own ways. He left them meat for them to enjoy and wondered what they were doing, but he could never meet them. Sometimes he would hear the fairies talk about a human stumbling in the forest and it would fill him with hope, but in the end all of them returned to the village without him even knowing they were there. He stopped hoping for them to find him many years ago and he stopped caring about that spell.

He ate berries and drank freshwater, he looked at the sky and slept most of the day. He survived, but he wasn't really living.

That is, until a certain traveling bard made his way to the lake.

And now, he was waiting for that same bard. For the last few days, his existence had become brighter since he was now looking forward to something. Someone, more specifically.

Feliciano brought him sweets and songs, he spoke with him and told him stories. He had promised to come back and so far his promises were kept intact, but Ludwig couldn't feel but sense something was wrong that day. It wasn't day anymore, it was now evening. Feliciano usually came by at noon, but he was late... So late Ludwig could actually prepare for his arrival, something that eased his mind a little. He had extended the tablecloth on the same spot they sat in everyday, he had bathed himself and brushed his hair and even learned how to wear those strange clothes properly.

Ludwig knew this was unreasonable, since they never actually arranged any meeting time, but the possibility of him not showing up was worrying him. It was terrifying, actually, not only because it would mean he would be left alone again, but because he would never know what happened to Feliciano. What if he got hurt? What if someone else took him away? What if he just forgot about him? All those possibilities were awful and Ludwig found himself seething with anger and jealousy until he finally realized he had no right to even think about that. He was a monster, he should be happy the bard even looked his way.

Ludwig didn't know if it was because he was the first human he had seen in fifty years, or because he was the 'pure soul' that was supposed to free him of the curse, or because he was the man that visited him in his dreams, but he already knew he was in love with Feliciano. If it was the man of his glory days, the Swan King, it would have taken him more time to realize, but the Ludwig right now had always known ever since the first time he had met Feliciano in those strange dreams. Even if at first it was superficial love caused by his soul-crushing loneliness, the moment he finally saw him in the real world that feeling had settled as an undeniable truth.

He loved him.

Hearing rustling amongst the woods, Ludwig, who was currently in human form wearing the same clothes Feliciano had given him, looked up with a hopeful look in his eyes, already thinking about what to say to him. "*I missed you*" was the one feeling he wanted to exteriorize to no avail, but the moment he laid eyes upon the intruder, his mind went blank.

He would recognize that man anywhere, even if he had grown older than the last time they met.

“What are you doing here?” Ludwig mumbled, feeling the black feathers form throughout his body despite his best attempts to remain calm. The sight amused Arthur greatly, who was no longer cowering in fear like he had done fifty years ago.

“This is my home, of course. I’m here to kick you out.”

“Are you going to lift the spell?”

“Lift the spell, you say, haha!” The chilling laugh made Ludwig feel the anger rise and rise, but he remained silent. “No, you idiot. I will do what I had to do all those years ago. You are nothing but a bloodthirsty beast, I’ve let you live for far too long.”

So that was it. He was going to kill him like he vowed to when he ran away from the forest, cursing him to remain there. This wasn’t a surprise for Ludwig, who always knew that man would return someday, but the thing that actually felt like a knife straight to his chest was the way Feliciano had appeared from behind the sorcerer and tugged his robes, cheeks flushed like he had run there.

The rational part inside him was considering all the options. Maybe Feliciano had no idea who he was, maybe he just saw him enter and became worried. That was a reasonable possibility, Ludwig knew that, and yet... The moment he saw Feliciano touch that man so easily and how Arthur looked back at him, the Swan King could no longer hear the rational voice in his head.

“Why are you with him?” Ludwig muttered, the claws at the end of his hands growing larger. Arthur noticed this and without thinking twice, he lifted an arm to serve as a shield to Feliciano. The clouds had appeared as expected, heavy and covering the night sky.

“Stay away!” He said, with his other hand reaching some of the vials on his hips, but Feliciano stopped him.

He had smiled at him.

“No, it’s okay! I can talk to him. We can just talk this through, alright? I know he’ll listen.” He said, doing his best to look calm and smiling in a way he considered would communicate there was no need to fight. Too bad it didn’t work, even when he tried to get closer. “Ludwig, I know it looks bad. Arthur told me who he is, and I know you might feel angry, but please, let’s just talk. We can break the spell together, you don’t have to stay here alone. Once the curse is lifted, the both of us can get out of here. Arthur will get the forest back and everyone will be happy, so...”

But Ludwig wasn’t listening. The moment he heard that sorcerer’s name falling from the lips of the bard, who made everything sound like a melody, his rationality wavered and by miracle it didn’t snap. His body was transforming steadily, black feather covering as he felt both claws and fangs grow sharper. The only reason he didn’t straight up attack was because Feliciano was there, but this same fact was the one that made everything hurt so much more, and to a beast whose emotions were closely connected to its humanity, this was dangerous. In a growl similar to an animal, he said:

“Get out.”

“H-huh...? No, Ludwig, we can...”

“GET OUT!”

It all happened too quickly.

The tall, black wings had raised themselves to the point they emitted a shadow so long both Feliciano and Arthur were covered by it and the serious yet kind man was nowhere to be seen. Instead, there was a raging feathered beast filled to the brim with fury, not only because he saw the bard alongside with the man who cursed him, but because he realized he was right. The Swan King was a beast and he would always be, even now instead of listening he let his emotions get the better of him, becoming a dangerous monster.

Arthur’s right hand was raised towards Feliciano and he pronounced a spell of protection, but the moment he tried to place it on the bard, it got neutralized. With a loud “*what the hell?!*” Arthur evaded an attack from the Swan King and rolled through the grass, the vials twinkling as he tried to understand what was going on, but he didn’t have time for that. Feliciano, despite being the coward he always was, managed to grab the sorcerer and help him stand up,

both escaping into the woods as a heavy rain started to fall accompanied by both thunder and lightning.

The forest trembled under the Swan King's feet, but he didn't chase any of the men who had invaded his kingdom and instead roared with such might it reached the village itself, but Feliciano could only think it sounded too much like a wail of pain, something that made him stumble as he guided Arthur to a safe spot.



Breathing heavily, both men were sitting against the trees, having reached a spot the rain hadn't touched. The terrain was slowly lifting on one side, something that revealed they were near to the mountain itself. The moist floor underneath them was soft and the perfect place to rest, so they stayed like this for a few more minutes. It was really dark, but thankfully the trees were less dense than in other parts of the forest, so the moonlight entering was enough for them to see each other.

That was one hell of a ride for sure and it was something Arthur expected, but the variable next to him was something he had to figure out or he would go insane.

“What the hell are you?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“I don't know if you are playing dumb or if you genuinely don't know.” Feliciano stared at him with wet eyes, being clear as day he was doing his best not to cry. Arthur could only sigh, wondering what he did to get stuck with this crybaby. He probably should explain. “At first I thought the reason you fainted was because my spell wasn't working properly, but that didn't make any sense. I could wake you up with the herbs I had on hand, but just now when I tried to put a protective spell on you, it didn't work. You nullified it, actually. It's like... You are already under a spell.”

And not only that, but he managed to tame the Swan King himself to the point they weren't ripped to shreds, but Arthur thought it might be because he is the quote unquote “pure soul” that is needed to break the curse, but he decided to not say it outloud since he didn't want to make Feliciano cry again.

“A spell? Me?”

“Yeah, I can’t quite wrap my finger around it, but it’s both powerful and old... I think it has been on you since you were born. It’s... Intertwined with your own magic, so it made it difficult for me to notice.” Feliciano tilted his head, showing he had no idea what Arthur was talking about. “You seriously don’t know anything...”

Groaning in annoyance, the blonde man raised his right hand and closed his eyes for a few seconds. At the same time, the red gemstone started to glow and Feliciano flinched in fear, but there was no smoke coming out of it and instead, a light sphere popped out of the ring. Arthur held it in between his fingers and then pressed it like it was a grape; his fingers were now drenched in that strange light as if it was a liquid. He then started to draw in the air with it and soon, many small pictures began floating above them. Pictures of stickman figures, but pictures nonetheless.

“We all are born with magic, even those villagers have some of it inside their bodies, but there are those who can wield it and those who can’t. I can wield it just fine, but I don’t have any powerful magic by myself since I am the son of a simple herbalist, so I made a pact with a magical creature to strengthen my abilities, which would probably make me a warlock instead, however you...” He squinted his eyes, looking at Feliciano more closely. “You have a lot of magical power, yet you can’t wield it. This is my hypothesis, but it’s probably because of the spell.”

Arthur drew a circle and began filling it with the white and glowing ink, much to Feliciano’s fascination

“This is your vessel... Ah, sorcerers usually call the body a vessel. Well, this is your vessel, you have a huge amount of raw magical power for a human, but it’s cleverly hidden under layers and layers of a really complex restraining spell so I didn’t notice until now.” Without prior warning, he held the brunet’s hand, inspecting it and drawing strange symbols in his palms with the ink and suddenly, a strange circle started to glow on Feliciano’s chest much to both men’s surprise. Feliciano kind of freaked out, but Arthur was too focused on his task to even notice or care. “There you go! Let’s see... A magic circle, huh, that’s archaic... This spell is not just for restraint it seems, I can see some protection and what I think is a fey blessing in it.”

Doing his best to remain calm and ignore the fact that a circle with many strange symbols in it was now doing a light show in his body, Feliciano tried to touch it with his fingers, but they passed right through while Arthur seemed like he was reading the runes it had. Whatever, this was something normal, probably.

“D-do I really have that...?”

“Yeah, I can’t even believe it myself. Why would a fey bless you, anyways?” He grumbled, clearly irritated.

Feliciano pressed his lips together, confusion dwelling in his heart. Confusion both because of this strange situation and the fact a fey creature had blessed him.

“But you were raised by fairies, did none of them bless you?”

“No, a blessing is far more complicated than that. I call it blessing, but it’s actually more like, uh... Ah, how do I put this...” He paused, fingers stopping middair before drawing once again. This time, it was a stickman figure with wings and sharp ears... Or Feliciano thought they were ears, Arthur’s drawings were quite weird. “A fey blessing’s is one final spell they put on a being they deeply care for. Their swan song, if you will. They give it when they know they will perish and it’s usually something like the ability to hear other’s thoughts, to speak with animals or to have perfect health, but this one is really strange. It has dream runes in it.”

Dreams, huh...

Arthur noticed Feliciano reacted at the mention of dream runes and smiled with enthusiasm. It seemed like magical spells were something he really liked to investigate and talk about, so even if Feliciano started to think he didn’t want to do anything with those things, he allowed the conversation he knew would happen... Well, happen.

“What? Do you have an ability surrounding dreams?”

“I... I think so.” He said, averting his eyes. “Ever since I was a child, my dreams were dark and scary, but at some point, I started to visit a lake and then meet...”

Ah, he should've seen this coming.

The moment he tried to think about his dreams, his head started to ache once again in that way that made him feel like it was getting torn open. He averted his hand and tried to hold his head, the sharp pain making him lose his breath.

“Huh? What’s happening?” Arthur mumbled with worry, but his eyes fixated on the magic circle and without realizing, he reached a hand to touch it. “The spell is... Is activating?”

Suddenly, a gush of light hit Arthur right in the face and made him stumble backwards, hitting his head against one of the trees and letting out a word Feliciano hadn’t heard before but knew was a curse word. The light, thankfully, wasn’t harmful and it just blinded him for a few seconds. The writing spell had been broken, so the ink in his fingers had vanished as well.

“Ah, bloody-”

He patted his head, cursing under his breath. However, he stopped right in his tracks the moment he saw Feliciano laying on the floor, the same moment the faint drizzle started to fall on top of them.

“Hey! Are you alright? Come on, this is the second time...!” He paused. “The second time you fainted... Wait, is this how the protective spell works? Then that is bullshit! Hey, wake up!”

Arthur kneeled next to the bard and shook his shoulders to try and wake him up, but Feliciano wouldn’t budge. It wasn’t like he was dead or injured, he was just... Sleeping. But this wasn’t a normal sleep. As a sorcerer with fifty and more years of experience under his belt, Arthur knew how risky sleeping spells were. They were only used in the most extreme situations and forcing a human to sleep was highly dangerous, especially if the one who casted the spell was nowhere near to break it.

Breathing peacefully, the protective spell had forcibly stolen his consciousness and put him to sleep.

“What a lousy spell, what the hell...” Arthur mumbled, laughing at himself when he rhymed those two words. He was a mess right now, honestly, his nervousness making him laugh to himself as he tried to think about a plan. Well, if this was the same situation as before, then he should just do the same things he did! “Alright, Dreamer’s Herb and Red Rosemary... I have some emergency water with me, and this...”

He ripped part of his cloak and he redid the same motions he did when he healed Feliciano in front of the villagers, putting the cloth on his forehead once the deed was done, but...

“It... It isn’t working...” He said, noticing how the Red Rosemary started to lose its color, a sign of it becoming nullified. He clutched Feliciano’s body with an increasing fear. “Is this because I tried to touch the magic circle? F-Feliciano, wake up! Damn it...”

And then, another “damn” was added once he heard the familiar and rough voice of a certain king, looming behind them. Arthur felt a shiver run through his spine, hugging Feliciano more closely as a reflex as he saw the huge beast of black feathers itself tilt its head, smelling them both and inspecting the situation. In an inhumane and growl-like voice, it spoke:

“*Was hast du mit ihm gemacht?*”

## Chapter End Notes

\* Cosa sta succedendo?: What is going on?

\* Bauernfrühstück is a German dish made from fried potatoes, eggs, green onions, parsley, cheese, and bacon or ham. It is similar to the English bubble and squeak. The ingredients are mixed in a pan and fried as an omelette. It is usually accompanied by a green or tomato salad or gherkins, and rye bread.

\* Was hast du mit ihm gemacht?: What did you do to him?

## Pas de six

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ludwig could feel himself changing into a monster.

He always felt it, since it was not only his body actually rearranging itself in painful rage, but his consciousness also wavered through the past and added another layer of suffering to his already agonizing state.

A beast had no use for a mind or a heart.

Unfortunately, he had both, and they were remembering things he didn't want to. The cold and unmoving body being protected by the man that had cursed him was like a reflection of what he had already lost, and it only increased the severity of the monster's rampage.

He remembered his youth, when none of this seemed possible. When he still held his dreams close to him and when he still enjoyed hope for a brighter future. When his older brother would read bedtime stories for him or tell him about his incredible adventures outside the castle walls. The one Ludwig liked the most, however, was the one of the enchanted lake.

“There is this enchanted lake hidden inside a dense forest. I stumbled on it by chance and I don't think I've ever seen a place so beautiful. The waterfalls, the trees and everything... Ah, you need to see it someday, Lutz! It's almost impossible to enter, but it's worth all the trouble; the fog and smoke that surround it might seem scary but it's harmless. There are fairies, too! I spoke with them and they gave me this necklace right here. It's pretty, right? I want to live there when I grow old, I will take you with me and we'll be friends with all the creatures. Doesn't that sound fun?”

He believed it was true, since it was his brother who narrated it, and he even had evidence to back his story up; that single necklace was enough proof for him. It was like nothing they had ever seen, which was quite a feat since as the two princes of a wealthy kingdom they had seen so many types of jewelry from all over the world. This one, however, was so strange and ethereal it seemed like it didn't belong to this world. It was made of a silver-like metal carefully crafted to resemble the leaves of a primrose and the blue gemstones that decorated

the flower petals had a mesmerizing glow to them. He still remembered how fascinated he was when he saw the necklace hanging from Gilbert's hands, like it was a glimpse of the world beyond the suffocating walls. Had it not been for his brother, Ludwig probably would've never considered the world beautiful at all since, well, it was him who taught him what it had to offer. Fairies, magic, love and adventures... Yeah, it was Gilbert the one who made Ludwig a hopeless dreamer and it was Gilbert who made the Swan King crave beauty and harmony... And what place had more beauty and harmony than the enchanted lake of those stories?

He genuinely believed someday his whole family would live in that forest. Mother, father and brother would smile at him and laugh and dance and sing, far away from the stiffness of the palace and the cold stone that comprised it. A childish wish for a childish Ludwig who would soon meet with the true face of the world. The ugly... No, hideous reality. War was suddenly real and not a plot point the protagonist had to overcome. Gilbert suddenly had to leave for months to fight that war, only to come back so changed and strange. More haggard with each return, more... Exhausted. He would still smile at Ludwig, but he stopped telling him stories or even talking with him for more than a few minutes. He feared what he had to say would shatter the illusion he tried so hard to keep, the illusion of a beautiful world that made his little brother happy, too bad he didn't realize Ludwig was now almost a teenager and knew that fairytales weren't real; his studies were harsh and the professors allowed no mistakes, and being a dreamer was a mistake. In war, a mistake costs lives, and in a war where the enemy held magic, mistakes were even more easy to make.

He still remembered when Gilbert tried to make Ludwig smile, showing off the fairy necklace with a weak hand movement, but Ludwig just sighed and said it was foolish that his brother still kept clinging to fairytales. He still remembered the look in his brother's eyes, and at that time he didn't recognize it but now, when he looked back at that moment, he knew it was grief. A grief he did his best to contain and brush off. "You're right, Lutz." He said, smiling. "You've grown so big I didn't even realize." He returned to the frontlines to fight the war some days after that.

And then, he didn't return. The news arrived with an injured and tired party of surviving knights.

Mother was devastated. Father was furious. And Ludwig... Didn't know what happened or why it happened. The funeral was a somber one, the whole kingdom mourned but Ludwig couldn't even fathom this was reality. It was a sunny day with no clouds in a sky that was so blue it looked like an ocean, not that Ludwig knew what the ocean looked like. Ludwig couldn't understand why the sky wasn't mourning as well, why it wasn't falling apart like the way he felt himself doing. The heavens weren't crying and he couldn't understand why they

had to choose his brother, why they allowed the hero to die, why the story had to keep going and why the world didn't stop moving.

Time passed and the skies were still clear, but Ludwig still hadn't found an answer for any of his questions. If his life was a story written by someone it was a tragedy for sure, but Ludwig wasn't a hero. His brother was a hero, with his hair like silver and eyes like ruby and the smile that protected him from the hideous world outside.

But he was gone.

The world wasn't beautiful. It never was. War was ravaging the land, the common people starved and the heavens were now covered in smoke and ash. Father was now on the frontlines in his son's stead, mother grieved and Ludwig felt like color didn't exist anymore, but the world didn't stop there either. Time was unforgiving and no matter the amount of pleading and praying, it would keep ticking.

Another notice came, this time it was a golden bird that had it attached to its leg. Father was gone too and the war was over. The barbarians, for some reason, retreated after killing the king and mother tried to save the common people and help them rise from the ashes, but with no king to stabilize affairs, their suffering barely lessened. The earth was ruined, lives were lost and it seemed impossible to recover. Mother perished due to grief and it was now only Ludwig left to protect the remains of his home. He was not even eighteen when he had to become king. Once again, the world didn't wait for him and it didn't stop. The crown sat on his head and would never leave, his retainers made sure of that.

Ludwig didn't know how he managed to do it, but after leaving behind the child he once was, he successfully saved the land. The people worked together to rebuild their lives, no matter how scarred they were. The skies were bluer than ever and Ludwig decided that his kingdom would only have beautiful things. This was his way of protecting his people so they would never experience that ugliness again, so there would be no more fallen heroes. The tallest mountain held many riches and he made sure to exploit them, bringing back gold and diamonds that could pay for repairs and food. And most importantly, to adornate the cracks the whole kingdom had, which was flourishing again once he became of age.

No one would see dead bodies or blood again, they would only see exquisite architecture and gorgeous gardens. The riches were endless, the mountain kept providing and Ludwig's greed

kept increasing. "Protect their hopes and dreams, bring back beauty into this wicked world and shun it off, close the walls and raise them even higher!"

He was called vain by some, greedy by others and selfish by those who couldn't understand why he focused so much on exterior beauty. The people had food and peace again, but they couldn't understand a king who had closed off his heart even if he had saved them. It didn't matter to Ludwig, since he would do whatever it took to protect his people, even if it meant becoming a tyrant.

Criminals of all kinds were executed on the spot, no matter the type of crime committed. Magic usage was the gravest of crimes and it often brought torture with it; their enemies killed his family with it, after all, no one was allowed to wield it anymore. No disturbances were forgiven and every single person had to behave and not even dare to step outside the walls. The penalty for wishing to see what was beyond the kingdom was death.

Ludwig's desire to protect had become twisted in paranoia and control, but the artificial beauty was still there and it was all he could ask for; during those endless nights where he would work and work to ensure the safety of the land, the gorgeous architecture and jewels pacified his heart. Everything that could harm his kingdom was destroyed, no matter what it was. A tyrant named Swan King had taken hostage Ludwig's body.

One day when organizing his childhood room, he found the fairy necklace from a long time ago. He remembered what his brother told him and Ludwig realized that there was another thing he could give his people, another beautiful view for them to rejoice in. A lake hidden inside a dense forest, what riches could it hide? Fairies weren't real, but if it really was as ethereal as his brother described, then... He wanted to have it and gift them to the common folk who worked so hard everyday. To let them live in the place Gilbert wanted to live in.

Some knights were dispatched to explore the secret woods no one dared to enter. The villagers closest to it would often tell stories about how it was enchanted and dangerous and how an ancient witch lived in there, but Ludwig didn't believe in fairies anymore, even when the exploration party had returned to the entrance of the forest disoriented and confused. "I guess I'll have to do it myself."

So he entered, with one hand holding a torch and the other clutching the fairy necklace close to his chest as he repeated every single word he remembered his brother saying. Waterfalls and trees and an otherworldly view hidden somewhere, a peaceful land that the claws of war

couldn't touch, he didn't even realize the moment his knights got lost and left him alone, he just had to find that place... He reached it. He knew it was the place Gilbert spoke about the moment he laid his eyes on it.

The world was beautiful again and under the moonlight with only the lit torch guiding him, he understood his brother's words. This lake was heaven.

But the land wasn't untamed; a small kid of bushy eyebrows and blonde hair was accompanied by tiny and winged beings and slender people with sharp ears. Fairies, elves and dryads lived in that forest and enjoyed the secret lake in peaceful bliss with a single human child speaking for them. "Return from where you came from, this lake is our home and my mother tasked me with protecting it! I am the sorcerer that protects this place!" The child shouted, red in the face with nervousness. A golden-haired elf patted his head and laughed openly, stating how proud he was; another one, almost identical to the first one, shyly agreed and asked for the humans to leave. Two dark-haired men, who clung to strange trees of pink flowers, also explained that humans should not intervene or else the lake would suffer. And then, many fairies hidden in fear stared at him, but one of them seemed to be strangely happy to see him. A tiny woman with long brown hair decorated with tulips looked at him with tearful eyes, but couldn't gather the courage to even get close.

But Ludwig couldn't care less about any of that.

"I am king Ludwig Beilschmidt and this forest is inside my kingdom and my territory. Therefore, I own this land." He declared with a chilly voice. "Leave at once or I shall use force."

The child refused, however, and spoke to the king with a single and effective threat. "If you don't abandon our home, I will use magic to kick you out!"

And this was enough to convince Ludwig this child and his friends were dangerous. Magic was a terrible crime and the mere possibility of it harming any of his citizens filled him with dread and terror. He then realized the witch the villagers feared had to be this boy's mother and the legends of her terrorizing the people had to be true; after all, now he knew magical beings were real. If that was the case...

Then he had to erase them to protect his people.

The details are fuzzy after that. There was a discussion, they argued and the dryads retreated in fear once Ludwig threatened to use fire; the elves started to chant something, probably a spell, but the fairy of the tulips had stopped them accompanied by another fairy who wore glasses. The child was trembling in fear and tried to keep himself from falling, but the moment he saw the necklace Ludwig clutched, he flew in a rage. "Why do you have that?!" He shouted, "Give it back! It's hers, not yours!"

The struggle ensued. Ludwig, despite deciding to erase the danger, couldn't bring himself to seriously harm a child or what looked like a child, so he could only try and push him away. The child didn't stop and soon a gust of wind formed in his small hand, attacking the Swan King, but the spell was clumsy and fearful and it didn't reach the man himself but the necklace that flew away and then the lit torch he held to illuminate his way and, oh...

It was a fire.

The flames engulfed a part of the trees and the screams of fear and pain rang in Ludwig's head who couldn't even gather the strength to stand. A plum tree was one of the casualties, one of the dryad's trees and life force. He saw how that dryad of brown hair held by a low ponytail fell to the ground, shaking in pain as burn marks appeared in his body. The other dryad tried to salvage the plum tree, but he was also caught in the fire and the chaos kept laughing at them and a big part of the forest was in flames. A water spell was casted by one of the elves, but it seemed to be too late and it was too weak. The plum tree as well as many others had burnt to the ground and the dryad that was connected to it started to fade and become ash.

Ludwig didn't remember what happened next.

He just heard crying and mourning and a child's voice screaming in horror. "You monster!" The lake had become so dark it looked like ink and the many magical creatures started to cough and fall one by one. The fairies couldn't fly anymore, the elves vomited blood and the sorcerer couldn't utter a single spell since his voice and hands trembled so much with grief. Maybe that same rage and pain was what caused his final spell to work even if he didn't mean to cast it.

With his small hands, a strange circle of light appeared and ingrained itself in Ludwig's chest; "you... you...!" It pierced his heart and he instinctively knew what it was. "You beast! Murderer! Monster!"

The orange hellish flames disappeared under a storm and heavy rain as the Swan King stood up and roared at the heavens. A demonic and deep laugh coming from nowhere and everywhere at the same time rejoiced in this fantastical play and black smoke filled his vision. *"So fun, so fun!"*

The Swan King couldn't remember the other details either. He just knew some of the magical creatures had escaped, the elves and the child were some of them, while others got trapped in there with him. The dawn had come but his body was no longer his. He had become a monster and he couldn't leave.

He was alone now. For the first two years, he was completely alone and couldn't feel anything. Ah, did the world finally stop? Was he finally free from time ticking away?

The forest slowly healed afterwards, but he didn't know how much time passed or what happened to his kingdom. The fairies and the dryad were the ones who couldn't escape, but none of them spoke to him save for the Tulip fairy who often stared at him, swimming in the lake in this foreign body. She sometimes talked to him, but he never answered and she seemed to fear what her words would do. He would only stare at the sky during the day, wondering why the heavens mocked him; they gave him wings, but he couldn't fly anywhere near them. They gave him the beautiful place of his dreams, but it had been touched by pain. At some point they even gave him peaceful dreams where he met someone, but they could never become reality either.

The Swan King was cursed and the one who cursed him had done something to that *someone* he finally got to meet and love.

"You...! Damn it, stay calm! I didn't do anything, I was just trying...!"

Now, in the present, the beast growled at that sorcerer and its trembling jaws opened wide to roar at both him and the heavens and everyone who could listen. A gut-wrenching scream of anguish coming from the deepest parts of the monster, finally letting see what was hidden beneath those black feathers.

Arthur had to cover his ears, feeling like his eardrums were about to burst and for a moment he considered just killing Ludwig right there, but he knew it would be suicide to try and fight with him in that state. Plus... Feliciano and the fairies' words managed to resonate in his head, annoying him and his thoughts and causing him to rethink everything. Ah, the fairies... He had to protect them, he now had the strength to do it, he now could avoid any deaths. Reaching the ring in his finger, Arthur started to chant an attack spell and was prepared to pierce the Swan King's chest with it, but a fast and blue glow flew right in front of him to stand right in front of the monster's eyes.

"For the stars' sake, you two! If you don't calm the hell down, Feliciano might never wake up!"

Elizabeta shouted and fluttered her uneven wings angrily, wielding the thistle flower sword and standing between two of the most important humans in her life with an unbreakable determination in her gaze. Her glow was tinted in blue, however, which revealed the anguish she felt in those moments.

"Ludwig, please. Wake up. I know you are there, you might look like a monster and you are worried about Feli, I know it, but you need to return to your senses." She pleaded, surrounding with her arms the long and black snout of the beast. An embrace he never got the luxury of enjoying in those fifty long years. The fairy's eyes were filled with tears as the beast breathing evened out. "I was scared, we all were! I feared humans and I feared you, but... I know you don't want to become a monster either, and I know Feliciano wouldn't want to see you act like one, and... I know Gilbert would never want to see his little brother become this. Please, think of him."

The beast growled, but this time it seemed more like a purr. Its feathers weren't bristly anymore and slowly, Ludwig returned to his senses. With Elizabeta's words, he returned to those days in which his brother was alive, but instead of grieving in despair, he imagined what face he would make if he saw him like this. "Oh, Lutz, did you have another nightmare?" He would ask softly, patting his head. "It's alright. Your big brother will stay right here. How about I tell you a story? It's about a valiant knight that rescues a Fairy Prince. If you think of them, they will protect you in your dreams. Doesn't that sound cool?" And he would stay by his side until he fell asleep, telling him what the Fairy Prince and the knight did in their happily ever after, like singing and dancing together. "The knight might feel like the Fairy Prince might fly away and he would be unable to follow since he is a mere human, but the Fairy Prince reassures him; no matter what, it was the knight the one who saved him and the one the Fairy Prince fell in love with, what he is was not important, but who he is."

The feathers started to disappear and the huge body of the beast decreased in size, to which Elizabeta fluttered to admire the transformation fading, but it seemed like it still wasn't enough to completely turn him into human again. At least it was enough to keep him rational, since he gave Arthur a terrifying look but kept his voice low and moderate.

“What happened to him?”

—♪ঢ়ঢ়ঢ়—

Feliciano had been moved back to the lake, sleeping on top of a flowerbed of those same luminous and healing flowers of before. With a peaceful breathing, he still hadn't woken up even after being carried all the way there by Ludwig, who was staring directly at him. Some of the fairies were sitting all around him but not too close, whispering amongst themselves while others were clinging to Arthur. Elizabeta and Roderich, however, were near Ludwig, who had black wings resting behind his back.

“Is there a reason why you have to look like that?”

“Roderich!”

Elizabeta tried to shush him, but Ludwig had already looked their way. With black feathers covering part of his body, it was clear he was still shaken by the whole situation, but he kept his mind as cool as possible. He didn't answer, however, and he just absentmindedly stared at the two fairies. The skies were covered by clouds, but there was no rain or thunder.

The Edelweiss fairy sighed and flew towards Arthur, who was mumbling to himself while looking at the scene.

“How are you supposed to inspect Feliciano if you are all the way over here?”

“I would inspect him if that bloody beast allowed me to!”

“Arthur!” Elizabeta sighed, trying to do her best to not lose her temper right there, but fortunately Ludwig wasn’t losing his either. Well, she could give this a go. Clearing her throat with a soft cough, she fluttered towards him and smiled when she noticed the way Ludwig covered part of Feliciano with his wings, as if he was protecting him from the Tulip fairy. “Uhm, Ludwig? Could you please, please, pleeeease let Arthur inspect Feli? And Roderich too, he may not look like it, but he’s the smartest out of all fairies in terms of magic theory and his eyes...”

She was whispering that last part, but Roderich made it clear he heard with a really loud “ahem.” Ludwig didn’t react, however, and just stared at the fairies and sorcerer with an empty and blue gaze. After a few seconds that seemed eternal, he seemed to finally relent and folded his wings. Arthur sighed and kneeled next to them, but when a dark wing hit his face he couldn’t help but openly curse.

“Hey! What the hell? You accepted!”

“Just him.”

“What?”

“Just the fairy.”

“Are you serious right now...?”

“...”

“Bloody hell.”

Arthur considered just leaving everything behind but gathered all the willpower possible and sighed, nodding.

“If Roderich can’t do it alone you will let me do my job, you hear me? Between the two of us I’m the only one who knows even a little bit about magic.”

Ludwig averted his eyes and kept silent much to Arthur’s annoyance, but with a quick flight Roderich finally managed to keep the situation on track. Taking off his miniature glasses, the fairy started to examine the sleeping bard more closely. As a magical being, he was inherently more sensitive to the intricacies of magic spells even if he didn’t wield it like sorcerers did, but there was always something that made him uneasy about Feliciano and this time was the perfect occasion to see if his suspicions were even remotely understandable.

Without a care in the world, he started to walk right on top of Feliciano's sleeping body, something that made Ludwig noticeably angry but with a pat from Elizabeta he managed to keep himself calm. Roderich's, not caring about it, wings folded behind his back and he frowned slightly, a gesture that was only accentuated as he kept looking at his magical flow.

"... Wait a minute." He mumbled, taking a step back and then practically standing on top of Feliciano's face, barely. "He's... This fool isn't human."

Elizabeta separated her lips in a surprised (but not too much) gesture.

"He's not human? Then that might explain why we felt comfortable with him so easily."

"What? How is he not human?" Arthur asked wrinkling his nose like he didn't believe that and, without realizing, he had also approached the unconscious bard to inspect him closer. "I guess a fey creature would have an easier time realizing that than me, but still... He doesn't have any pacts, I would've recognized it if he did, but a non-human? What is he then, a changeling?"

"No, he's not a changeling either. I think he's the offspring of a fey and a human, but I can't tell what kind of fey..."

"A half-fey? But that's so rare, he doesn't even have sharp ears! Ugh, if only Alfred was here, even if it pains me to admit it, he knows more than me about this type of thing..."

"Don't be foolish, it's still possible to be a half-fey that looks more human, just... If you could look at his vessel from up close, you would instantly recognize it."

"Wait, then that means the fey blessing he received... Oh." Arthur paused, staring at the calm bard that was kept prisoner in his dreams. He didn't want to say it out loud, but judging from both fairies' expressions, they understood instantly. Averting his eyes, the sorcerer spoke: "Do you guys know something? And you, beast, you know him better than we do. Did he tell you who his parents are?"

Both fairies shook their heads and, at the same time, they looked at the suspiciously silent Ludwig. Arthur stared at him for a solid minute, fearing the beast had broken down or something like that until Ludwig stared at the sorcerer suddenly.

"His father was a prince. His mother was a commoner."

His voice was low and it made the earth under them tremble accompanied by a far away thunder, but the feathers were decreasing with each breath Ludwig took; he had clutched Feliciano's hand, caressing it with a tenderness that was out of place for a monster like him, but Arthur, a bit creeped out, nodded and stealthily moved a bit further.

“Alright. Let’s start with that.”

—♪—

Feliciano was so happy he could feel himself practically gliding through the glass. Or at least he tried to trick himself into believing that.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” He asked, clenching the hand of the man that sat in front of him, back resting against a tall tree with pink flowers. Feliciano spoke and spoke, describing the joy he felt when staring at the gorgeous place he and his lover were resting in, but... “Come on, look at me. Are you tired? You look tired. Should we take a nap together?”

His lover wasn’t responding. Eyes tinted in dull blue, he wouldn’t even move despite wearing a flawless smile and his breathing keeping steady, almost like he was asleep, but Feliciano knew he wasn’t.

“... C-come on, let’s dance!” Feliciano exclaimed, taking both of the other’s hands and trying to get him to stand up, but he wouldn’t budge. After a few more attempts, the brunet then decided he would dance alone. Maybe it would cheer up his lover, maybe seeing him dance for him would make him react somehow. He had already tried many things, like making a flower crown like they used to do back when they were younger and putting it in his blonde head, or even singing their own melody, but nothing worked. Dancing was one of the last things he hadn’t tried yet, but...

Extending his arms to the sky, a perfectly straight line had been drawn with his body as Feliciano closed his eyes. He already knew. He knew this wasn’t the man he fell in love with just like he knew this wasn’t the place of his dreams. He wasn’t the same gentle stranger that

comforted him through his darkest days, but... He didn't want to admit that. How could he? He wore that same stern yet timid face, that body that reminisced of inanimate dolls was still identical to the one of the man he loved. No, he had to be *him*. He was... Tired, maybe. Maybe he wasn't feeling like himself today. Maybe something happened that stole his spirits. Maybe, maybe, maybe.

“Watch me closely, okay?”

With a heaviness almost impossible to bear weighing his chest, Feliciano started to walk in his tiptoes to one side, complete silence being replaced in his mind by a song he didn't know and he felt so fragile, so utterly alone. Delicate movements replacing the words that had been caught in his mouth, unable to escape even if he wanted to pronounce them so desperately. Dancing a *pas de deux* by himself while he tried to fool his mind, how very fitting...

With his left leg raised horizontally, Feliciano leaned onwards and hid his face with his extended arms, moving them in a circular motion behind him as if they were wings as he did his best to keep himself steady, but the steps weren't made for a single person to make. No, there was someone supposed to help him and dance with him, that someone had to place his rough but gentle hands on his waist and provide support while he stood closely behind, offering his warm palm and kissing his cheek. But that someone wasn't here.

“Please, look at me. Answer me, tell me you are alright, tell me you are here...”

His thoughts were loud and were accompanied by an orchestra that mocked him, violins offering a solemn and desolate sound while the trombones' fortitude screamed in anguish as if they wanted everyone to know in how much pain he was. An oboe held the notes, the miserable leitmotif of his whole life and kept repeating it, dancing around his mind like a lost feather, but even then, the elegance of its movements kept haunting him like he had no way of escaping that past of stiffness and loneliness that suffocated him for all his childhood, forcing young children to grow prematurely in order to survive.

“Is this also your melody?”

He could swear the automaton staring at him moved, but he couldn't see him anymore. Feliciano pathetically tried to spin, hoping his stranger would stand and help him do what he couldn't do alone, but he knew that would be impossible, even in his own wildest dreams. He

knew this dream wasn't a normal one. Maybe it was the Limbo, maybe he was dead and he would never return to the world that had let him down so many times. Maybe that was a good thing, but that meant he couldn't get out of there.

*"You aren't really here, are you? Wherever you are, wherever you want to be, don't go, I'm begging you. Don't leave me behind. I can't bear to be left behind again."*

In the next step, he had to fly. He had to be lifted by his partner to feel like he was flying, but he still wasn't responding. He still wasn't looking at him.

*"Our first and last pas de deux, but you aren't even dancing with me."*

He had so many regrets, so many things he wanted to say but could never whisper, not only about the lover he now was sure was never real, but about his family as well. The face of his brother came to mind, the day where they waved goodbye like any other night just before bed. Ah, he wanted to go back home, the outside world was so cruel and so terrifying. If he had to become a caged bird then so be it, as long as he wouldn't feel this sort of pain again. It didn't matter the amount of artificial sugar and caramel Feliciano tried to wrap himself into, the despair was still ticking inside his body and replacing his heartbeat.

*"Even then, for a little longer..."*

Without realizing, what was underneath him was no longer grass, but the lake itself. With each step he took, the water wavered and the ripples disturbed the peace, but it still acted like it was solid ground. With no stranger to lift him, then he supposed he had to try and fly by himself even if he had no wings. He jumped, arching his back beautifully and offering his chest to the heavens, not caring if they decided to pierce it. For a short moment, it could've looked like he was being held high by someone, a shadow of some sort grasping his waist, but the illusion shattered as his body fell to the floor since, again, he enjoyed no wings nor partner. Composing himself and rising once again, his legs were giving up but he had to keep going. He still remembered how the stranger seemed to be interested in seeing him not only sing, but also dance, but he supposed that wasn't important anymore.

*"Let me stay in this dream with you. Just for a little longer, even if you are not you anymore, let me engrain your face in my mind, to not forget."*

But he couldn't remember him. His hands raised high and his legs trembling in exhaustion, the face of the love of his life had disappeared from his mind once again and, ah...

The tears naturally followed and he couldn't keep dancing, even if it was for his own sake. Falling to his knees, the water that acted as a floor kept him from sinking to the depths.

"Just this once..." He pleaded, voice shaking as he was unable to look at the doll that wore his lover's face, but maybe he had been a doll all along. Maybe it's batteries had run out and maybe his words would not reach him, but he couldn't do anything else. "Just this once I want to remember you. Even if you are fake, even if you were never real to begin with, even if you never loved me... I want to be able to look back at this and see it as a beautiful memory, not a painful one. Please."

Covering his eyes with both hands, the pitiful laments clouded his gaze and he could only cry his heart out, feeling as if it had been torn apart. Why did he leave home? Why did he ignore Lovino's warnings and worries? Why did he decide to follow a flimsy dream? Why did he have to remain alone and pathetic even in death? Dreams used to be his safe space, the place he fled to when the real world was unbearable, why did they have to become painful again? Why, why, why?

"I want to go back."

But where? To his childhood days? To the time before leaving his home? To the dream he so desperately craved?

No, that wasn't it, he wanted to return to the living world. Even if it was scary and lonely, it wasn't fake. It had real people who loved him for who he was, who scolded him and supported him, it had his brother and his people, the villagers and the fairies and also...

"Ludwig..."

Ah, ah... Just one last time he wanted to see him. If he was dead then he could be a little bit selfish, right? He didn't even remember what supposedly killed him, all he knew is that he felt an unthinkable headache and then nothing. He didn't remember who he was with or what he was doing. He felt so weak and lonely, and the stranger he loved so dearly wasn't there either. Instead he was replaced by an inanimate, accursed automaton... Or was he?

Feliciano heard some rustling and the sound of wood colliding together. *Thwack, thwack*, the doll that stole his lover's face had stood up with such difficulty its stiff movements were clunky and had no mechanical elegance to them. With a perfect but lifeless rhythm, the automaton walked towards the bard who, without knowing what to do, could only stare at it with teary eyes while it kneeled next to him and in a slow and clumsy gesture placed its hands around him, the coldness of its touch being strangely soothing.

"Are you comforting me?" Feliciano asked, letting out a bitter laugh. This too had to be fake, but he had no one else to reassure him, so he thought it was alright if he tried to trick himself into believing this was genuine. "Thank you."

With a shaky voice, Feliciano accepted the awkward hug and stared back at those empty and dull eyes. His own eyes were supposed to be clouded by tears, but...

"...!"

This was the first time he could see everything so clearly. The face of his lover... He knew it. He recognized it even if it had no expression or life in it. It was *him*.

"Ludwig!"

Suddenly, it all made sense and like a waterfall filling an empty cavity, the memories flooded into his mind. The lake of his dreams... It was the enchanted lake of Schwanenberg, hidden amongst trees and fog, and the man he met there was the cursed king who was unable to escape the place. The blonde hair and kind blue eyes, the stern but tender movements and even the sad expression he sometimes wore, it was all Ludwig all along. He was guided by those dreams that connected the two of them and he finally managed to find the stranger he loved, but the veil of phony allure that covered that dream stopped him from really seeing him. Ah, how stupid he was for wanting to cling to that fictional world instead of looking at what was really there. He blinded himself with illusions and refused to recognize that the real

world, while scary and painful sometimes, also had beauty in it. He just had to look for it..., no he had found it, but he refused to accept it.

“It was you... All this time, it was you who I was looking for.” Feliciano mumbled. The automaton tilted its head, flawless smile wavering for a moment and a single tear fell from its dull eyes while the brunet hugged it. It made a sound with no voice of its own, but Feliciano knew what it meant. A vanishing goodbye and an instruction to meet the real Ludwig and to never let him go again. The doll disappeared and became water, falling through his fingers, but even if Feliciano wanted to scream and beg it not to go even if it wasn’t real, he kept quiet and swallowed his cries.

After a few seconds in which he did his best to digest everything he now knew, Feliciano stood up once again and observed the water under his feet become perfectly still, but he couldn’t relax.

“How do I get out of here?” He whispered to himself; the cowardly and weak bard was nowhere to be seen. “I have to see him. I have to tell him everything, I have to... I’m not dead, I know that, I just need to wake up, but... How? Should I pinch my cheeks?”

Using his two hands to press his skin between his fingers, the pain sure felt real but he was still there. How annoying! Wasn’t there supposed to be a door now, like, metaphorically? Or literally, he couldn’t care less! He had his realization, the epiphany that was supposed to put him on track once again, but he was still alone there!

...

Wait, he wasn’t.

Looking better at the lake under his feet, he saw a reflection of a person that certainly wasn’t by his side. Alright, that was another spooky thing that freaked him out, but he had to focus!

“Excuse me, are you... Uhm, can you help me?” He asked while kneeling and practically sticking his nose to the water in an attempt to see who that person was.

It was a woman, she had long brown hair braided on her shoulders and decorated with many flowers he recognized as primroses. She stared back at him with golden eyes, almost like she was his own reflection... Well, she looked a lot like him, but she was smiling gently and calmly unlike the nervous Feliciano who tried to speak to her, placing his hands on the ground to stabilize himself. Somehow... She seemed familiar. The panic in Feliciano's heart had settled once he heard her speak with a voice that reminded him of birds and ocean waves. Behind her, what should be a black void reflected was instead a night sky filled with stars with three of them shining the brightest, forming a beautiful triangle while their accompanying stars formed three constellations Feliciano recognized. An eagle on the right, a lyre on top and a swan on the left. They were ghostly figures, flapping their wings softly in the vault of heaven behind the woman.

“Oh, child...” She spoke, tucking some of her hair behind her sharp ears... Wait, sharp ears? And that expression she had.. So tender, like she was seeing someone she missed dearly after such a long time. She was crying, too, but her tears looked like pearls. Her own hands were placed against Feliciano’s and she wailed softly. “Did my wish finally come true? All these years I wanted to see you and speak with you like this... Ah, this must mean my blessing has finally worked the way I intended it to... It’s a bit sad, but I’m still happy you can see me at last.”

“...”

Closing her eyes for a moment, she placed her forehead against the water mirror that kept them apart in a futile attempt to feel Feliciano’s warmth while he couldn’t utter a word, staring back at her and feeling as if a part of his heart had been returned to him. He knew who she was, when he was younger, he always daydreamed about meeting her. What color her eyes were, how they would look when she spoke to him, how much her smile reflected the sun and if she loved him as much as he loved her.

“Mother...”

She choked back a sob and smiled brightly.

“My precious, dear son, I missed you so much.”

## Chapter End Notes

\* *Coppélia* is a comical ballet about two fated lovers, Franz and Swanhilda, who meet Dr. Coppélius, a doctor who made a life-size dancing doll called *Coppélia*. It is so lifelike that Franz becomes infatuated with it and sets aside his true love, Swanhilda who wants to show him *Coppélia* isn't real by dressing as the doll, pretending to make it come to life and ultimately saving him from the inventor who wishes to sacrifice Franz to make *Coppélia* come to life. It is loosely based on *The Sandman* by E. T. A. Hoffmann, who also wrote *The Nutcracker* and the Mouse King, the book for which Tchaikovsky based *The Nutcracker* ballet.

\* *The Sandman* is a short story about a man called Nathanael who falls in love with the "daughter" of Professor Coppelius Olimpia, an automaton, and rejects his rational and mature fiancéeé Clara, stating that Clara is the soulless woman while Olimpia is the human. Nathanael battled with a traumatic childhood and ultimately died when he realized Olimpia wasn't real.

\* Cygnus, Lyra and Aquila are three constellations that represent a swan, a lyre and an eagle respectively, but the brightest stars they have are Deneb, Vega and Altair (the last two stars that represent the Star Crossed Lovers) which shape the Summer Triangle, which was just so perfect. It's a shame doesn't have one of the two Star Crossed Lovers stars, but I decided in my mind the Swan and Eagle are swapped.

\* This has also a lot of Princess Tutu inspired elements... Welp!

# Dance of the Little Swans

## Chapter Notes

I'm sorry for taking so long, but this is a really lengthy chapter. We have just one chapter to go, but worry not! I have at least five different extras planned! They will focus on different chapters but for now, enjoy. (o'▽'o)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Maybe his mother was a witch...”

“But witches aren’t fey, Tolys.”

“They’re not?”

“No, witches and sorcerers are just humans who can wield magic, though some of them can befriend us! That might be why we forget they aren’t fey. Do you remember Arthur’s mother?”

“Oh, now that you mention it... She was a witch as well, wasn’t she? You really have a good memory, Elizabeta.”

“Yep, I remember her when she was a young child, she had been rejected by humans and ran away to the forest... She was so similar to Arthur, they had the same eyebrows! But it has been many years, maybe I don’t remember her correctly.”

“How many years?”

“She died way before the whole curse thing, so it must be at least sixty years... Or a hundred. Or more.”

“Argh, it’s, like, such a pain keeping track of this human years thingie.”

“I know, right? Why should we learn those things? It’s not like those bastards will come here anyways!”

“Heh, but Chiara, isn’t that a human word? Bastards.”

“U-ugh...”

“I agree.”

“Eek, Anya, don’t speak so suddenly, you freaked me out!”

“Fufu. Sorry, Isabel.”

“Wait! If he’s old... Doesn’t that make Arthur a grandpa?”

“Bwahaha! A grandpa, he totes is one, you’re so right, Eliza! What’s a grandpa, though?”

“It’s like a really old human with white hair and wrinkles all over his face.”

“But Arthur doesn’t have, like, white hair or wrinkles...”

“But he is one, you fools. He just doesn’t look like it since he is a sorcerer. Human sorcerers stop aging and remain young for as long as they have magic in their vessel. So, technically, he is a grandpa.”

“You two really know a lot about humans... Elizabeta and Roderich are, like, totally human nerds. Don’t talk to them too much, Tolys.”

“But it’s interesting to hear.”

“Gah, you guys are so boring! I don’t want to keep hearing about this nerdy nonsense! Humans are lame!”

“Hey, they’re not lame!”

“They totally are, Eliza! Lame, lame, lame!”

“Oh my stars, can you be quiet?! I’m trying to work here and having seven fairies chatting is making my head spin!”

Arthur shouted, red in the face and frowning his bushy eyebrows while the seven fairies, Tulip, Carnation, Lily, Poppy, Chamomile, Rue and Edelweiss, clammed up. Maybe it was the mention of his mother that added to his already grumpy state... Or, to use a better word, tense and anxious state. Not only did he have a ticking bomb looking at him like it was ready to tear him into pieces if he touched too much, but the breathing of the unconscious bard was getting weaker as time passed by. This was something that did not go unnoticed by Ludwig, whose temper was making the clouds darker and heavier with water but thankfully it wasn’t raining yet. The beast-like man was staring daggers at Arthur, who already knew what was the question directed at him.

“It’s a side effect.” He explained, fidgeting with the vials he carried as if he was searching for a cure, but he knew very well he had nothing like that, not for a powerful spell that he himself had activated. “Forcing humans to sleep is highly dangerous. Most fey don’t know it since they never encounter them, but sleeping spells are like poison to untrained minds that aren’t accustomed to magic. Using a weakening or deafening spell isn’t that dangerous since it doesn’t attack the mind itself, but sleeping or charming spells do... Then again, he isn’t really human, so I suppose that’s why he hasn’t kicked the bucket yet... A-ah, it was a joke, don’t look at me like that.”

A thunder made all the fairies flinch, a signal of Ludwig's anger, and Arthur tried to calm him down.

"If we want to find a way to break the spell, we have to know who put it there. If it was his mother, then it means she has to be a fey, but what kind of fey? The spell elves use, for example, are different from those of fairies or dryads... But all spells and curses have a way to lift them peacefully. A condition that must be met." Arthur pronounced that last word carefully, without being able to look at Ludwig in the eye. "If we figure out who his mother was, we might get a clue, but... That's just wishful thinking. How in the world are we going to discover anything...? He isn't here to answer any of our questions!"

Arthur let out a sigh, unconsciously holding the ring on his finger and he considered invoking his patron. It might be annoying and harmful for the forest itself, but it was an option. A last resort, sure, but an option nonetheless. However, Elizabeta's voice made him look at her, confused once he saw her cover her mouth with both her hands. She was staring directly at Feliciano and after a few seconds, she got closer to him and extended a finger to touch the tip of his nose. For a while now, and maybe because of the whole conversation about the past, the image of a certain fairy kept popping in her head and the more she thought about it, the more similarities she found between her and Feliciano.

"Arthur..." She spoke, a faint tremble in her voice. "Do you remember the Primrose fairy?"

That name made everyone stare at her, including Ludwig who for the first time in ages had shifted his attention from Feliciano to the other fairies. Arthur frowned slightly.

"Giselle? Of course I do." He said, like he was offended at the question, but after a few seconds he looked around and realized he hadn't seen her since he returned. It's not that he had much time to catch up with everyone, he had yet to see the dryads and the other magical creatures that were left behind, but... "Where is she, anyways?"

""She left the forest... Uhm, I don't really remember when, but I think it was..."

A deep and beastly voice was the one who answered.

"Twenty one years ago, I think."

Hearing Ludwig talk sent shivers down the spine of every single person who heard him, but Arthur's surprise overpowered the disdain he hadn't bothered to hide. Elizabeta, meanwhile, had sat on top of Feliciano's chest.

"She... left? How?" Arthur asked, looking at the fairies in search of answers. The one who answered was Roderich.

"We're still not sure. None of us were supposed to leave, but you know she always liked to break the rules... She had been practicing shapeshifting spells, too, like she was prepared to leave." The Edelweiss fairy sighed, fixing his glasses. "The last time we saw her, she told us she found a way to slip through the cracks. I was hopeful, of course... You can imagine my face when she said it was the power of love. Well, she always longed for the human world and all it had to offer, love was one of those things she craved."

Of course it had to do with love.

"Does... Does that mean... Does *this* mean she achieved it?" Elizabeta asked, pressing her hands on Feliciano's chest which weakly went up and down with each breath. "Did she find the love she wanted? Is he proof of it? He's so similar, I hadn't realized until now, he's... But how? We can't have children like humans do, can we?"

Roderich stared at the Tulip fairy, who could barely hold her tears and her glow was a soft blue once the pieces were slowly placed where they had to be.

"The shapeshifting spell she was practicing was so she could resemble as closely as possible a human. Maybe it also changed the way her body worked, but we aren't sure of it, Eliza. It's just a theory." He paused. "But if it's true... Then she is gone. He has a fey blessing, after all."

A suspicion so outrageous and yet so very possible. Elizabeta choked out a sob while the other fairies whispered amongst themselves. Ludwig wasn't talking or even moving, it was like he was holding his breath.

“That fool...”

Yes, she was a fool. Arthur knew it was very in character for Giselle. She was a hopeless romantic who dreamed too much about a world she didn’t belong in. Now that this puzzle was getting closer to getting resolved, he could see her face in Feliciano’s. Arthur knew her very well.

How could he not? She was the one who raised him in his mother’s stead.

It was so many years ago he would be considered a grandpa, just like Elizabeta said.

His mother... He didn’t remember her that well. She was a “witch” to the humans who feared her, but in reality she couldn’t wield magic. In reality, she was a herbalist and her crime was knowing how to use herbs to heal injuries and body pains. It was a noble job, but the humans scorned her anyway since they didn’t understand her. So, she befriended fairies instead. It wasn’t sixty years ago, though. It was when the Swan King’s kingdom didn’t exist yet, so it had to be at least two hundred years ago. She brought a small baby with her to the untainted forest everytime she visited it, a baby who she called Arthur and who she left in the care of the fairies, since she feared he would get hurt if she kept him close.

She wasn’t a witch, but she did get along with the fairies, elves and dryads.

She wasn’t a witch and she loved her son dearly.

She wasn’t a witch, but the villagers she loved to help believed she was one.

She wasn’t a witch... So she couldn’t survive getting burned at the stake.

So now, Arthur had to be taken care of by the magical creatures that dwelled in the woods. They gave him affection and taught him how to use magic and since he had been raised since

a very young age, Arthur didn't feel any connection to the human world even if he visited it when he became a boy. He would place invisibility spells on himself and would sneak through the streets, stealing what he considered would make the fey creatures happy, such as trinkets and food.

His growth had been stunted as well after living in a forest so rich in magic, but he didn't care. The moment he became a boy, he had already mastered many spells and his family were the fey creatures around him, even if they were capricious and mischievous sometimes, often making fun of him for his little magical energy. An elf with blond hair and blue eyes would laugh at him, saying he had strange ears and they would quarrel all day long about it. He was different to them, he knew it and he was used to it, but still...

The one who loved him the most, though, was the Primrose fairy herself. While she was as small as the other fairies, she felt so much bigger when she spoke and sang. She was the one closest to his mother and became mesmerized by her stories about the human world. Giselle truly wanted to be part of it, but Arthur hated it. They would often argue about it, too, but Arthur would still bring her story books he stole to quell her curiosity. The ones that had love in them were her favorite and, since neither Elizabeta or Roderich were interested in the human world yet, it was only Arthur the one who would listen to her.

“How lovely it sounds out there...” She would say, pressing her small fingers that were the size of the letters in the pages. “Wouldn’t it be beautiful to fall in love, Arthur?”

But he would wrinkle his nose and pout, showing his disapproval.

“Of course not. It’s better to be in the forest far away from them, they are all mean and they say you guys are ugly and evil.” He would cross his arms in disinterest. “I don’t need love, and neither do you!”

Giselle would chuckle and shrug as her wings rested behind her.

“Perhaps I don’t, but I still crave it. The love depicted in these stories seems so different from the one I feel for you and my sisters... Maybe you will feel it when you grow older. A love so powerful it even breaks curses and a need so strong to protect the one you love...”

“But I’ll never fall in love with anyone!”

“Oh, you won’t? But you never know what might happen!” She would pinch his cheeks and her long and brown hair would flutter in the wind as she laughed, looking back at the storybook. “Why would a fairy place a spell on a beautiful princess, though? We love beautiful things, if we were to place a spell on someone beautiful, it would be to protect them.”

Giselle would sigh, wondering why the humans viewed them in such a bad light and Arthur, annoyed as always, would shift the conversation.

“And how would you break that spell?”

And then, Giselle would smile at him.

Arthur knew Giselle well, she was the fairy who was the closest to a mother to him. He also knew how much she wished for him to return to the human world where “he belonged” and he knew it was most likely because she was jealous of him, since she also wanted to belong there. But he also knew that, despite being so different, they had come to care for each other to the point she considered him part of her fey family, telling him the way to lift all her spells.

“With a true love’s kiss, of course.” She would say, smiling at him but looking beyond the dense woods that protected them from the outside world.

He had almost forgotten that smile, and even now in the present he had a hard time remembering the exact way her eyes gleamed, but he now had no doubts about it. If this was really her son... Then he knew exactly what to do. Leaning towards the sleeping bard, Arthur placed his hand on top of the other’s. The same hand that wore the ring of the red gem, which for a while now had been glowing strangely.

“Alright. I know how to break this spell, we need to...”

But a loud thunder interrupted him. It was getting brighter and daytime was arriving, but it wasn’t a relief. Instead, it was like the seven trumpets announcing the chaos that would soon engulf the world. The clouds were blocking the sunlight and the beast was growing in size as its human form became more and more twisted, accompanied by a faint rain. In the place of

an ugly duckling was a feathered monster whose mind was being put to rest after a long night and...

Arthur didn't have time to react. With a low growl, a black claw had attacked him, pushing him away from the unconscious body with such force he practically flew across the floor, his back hitting the ground with a loud sound.

“Agh!”

The fairies started to scatter away, terrified and flying in all different directions while the Swan King himself towered over the two men. Arthur had been hit in the sides and an increasing dark red color started to paint his shirt at the same time the black smoke began to flow from his ring, covering his wound.

“Damn...” He cursed under his breath, the pain burning in his skin and it was then when he knew his words wouldn't do anything once he stared at the monster in front of him. He knew he wouldn't survive if he were to attack it with his magic alone, so he had to borrow someone else's. And yet... He wanted to try and speak with it, since time was not on their side. He had to make sure Giselle's son was safe, even if it meant facing a horrifying beast. “Hey! Stop it, we have to work together. I know you are angry and you hate me, but...”

The beast tilted its head, almost like it was listening and for a moment, the sorcerer was thinking this was working, but the small bell-like sounds above Arthur's head revealed that it was the doing of fairies; they were trying to distract it.

“Arthur! Get out of here!” Elizabeta shouted, barely keeping herself in the air. Ludwig was distracted and staring at the small fairies, hypnotized. “You can't reason with him when he's like this! You'll get hurt again...!”

It didn't work for too long, though. It sniffed the air and its eyes were fixated once again on Arthur. More specifically, the black smoke that was slowly healing the injury. The beast recognized the energy and it started to growl even more threateningly than before. Its feathers stood up and rain began to pour, thunder roaring in the sky. Demonic energy, hostile and dangerous to the land he was tasked to protect by this curse. Dangerous to the fragile fairies and the unconscious prince.

It knew what to do and it launched forward, separating its jaws and exposing the sharp teeth that were about to rip the sorcerer's throat, but a sudden ghostly figure appeared and acted as a shield. The loud crash of two forces shook the earth and the red gemstone of the ring had lost its color, all after Arthur's patron acted with no need of him invoking it. However, even if it effectively protected him from harm, it now meant that he had no chances of even staying there without the risk of being attacked again, so after the Swan King raised his wings to serve as a barrier between Arthur and the fairies, the sorcerer stood up and retreated to the woods, clutching the injury that wasn't completely healed yet. In this short moment, he realized three things while a deafening roar resonated into his bones.

First, the curse was much worse than he anticipated.

Second, Ludwig was protecting both Feliciano and the fairies from Arthur, which meant they would be safe even if he were to leave.

And third... his patron had acted by *his* own accord, something unprecedented. Frightening, even; he could hear *him* laugh in his mind, smoke stitching the wound as the fiend seemed to be so amused by the situation he could barely hold himself together.

*"My, what a dramatic turn of events!"*



His wound was mostly healed now. The perks of having a pact, he supposed, but he couldn't rest yet and neither could his patron, who was getting yelled at from inside the ring while Arthur left the forest with the dawn arriving.

“You damn... It was your fault! He freaked out because of you! If you didn't appear when I didn't tell you to, maybe that beast wouldn't have reacted the way it did!”

The ghostly and dark figure surrounded the sorcerer and the tone of his voice made it seem like he was both amused and offended.

“I only tried to help you, Arthur. That monster attacked you even before I manifested myself, didn’t it? Healing you when hurt is one of the terms of our contract. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Yeah, but I never told you to act on your own, you bloody demon!”

“I was just so very worried, what if *mon cher* Arthur got killed? I would have no soul to feast on! What a shame, I can’t allow that when I already invested so much in you! Don’t you pity me? I made a pact with a suicidal little herbalist, it’s like noticing your food has jumped into a pond so you can’t enjoy it like you should. Sniff, sniff.”

“You little...”

These arguments were fairly common between them, but since Arthur didn’t know any other pacters or demons, he didn’t know if it was an usual attitude one would have with their patron. He didn’t really care and it seemed like the fiend was fond of these nonsensical conversations they had, since he would always stir them up. When it got too unbearable, however, Arthur knew how to make that demon yield.

“If you keep annoying me, I will just use your name to shut you permanently.” He said, smirking at the ring. “You know I can do that, since I basically own your name and they are the greatest power and weakness you devilish idiots have.”

The fiend stopped speaking for a solid minute.

“... I will retire now, oh, great master of mine! If you require my assistance, do call me and I will come running, er, floating to you! *Au revoir, au revoir!* Ah, by the way, you have until next dawn to save the cute little bard, so do your best, master!”

And just like that, the smoky being disappeared once again, hiding itself in the gemstone.

“As easy as always... And what, next dawn?” The blond scoffed.

He knew the fiend's words were truthful, since that was one of the other conditions of their contract, but he still hated to rely on that devil. He couldn't do much about it, though, whether he liked it or not, fiends had such mastery over magic and curses they were the perfect teacher for a knowledge hungry sorcerer like himself. The only reason he hadn't invoked him in the forest was because he feared it would be harmful to the more nature oriented creatures that lived there, but well, it seemed like the beast was the one the most affected by it. Whatever, he had a whole day to figure everything out and despite being exhausted, he prided himself in his ability to push through the worst situations ever. And how did he do that?

He had no idea, honestly, he just made a plan, it all went awry and then somehow it worked in the end. Whatever!

Mumbling to himself, Arthur started to scribble in the air with the liquid light he had shown Feliciano before, concocting a plan under his breath while he shook the rain off his clothes and hair, but a surprised and childish voice made him look behind him.

“It’s mister magician!”

Gisela pointed at him, her tired face revealing she had most likely just been woken up, but her eyes were bright and staring directly at the glowing drawings. Besides her, Hildegard frowned at the sight of Arthur and there were many young villager men following the mother-daughter duo.

“We heard a low noise coming from the woods, was it your doing?” The woman asked in her thick and intimidating accent, pulling Gisela’s hand and making her stand behind her. “It sounded like a...”

“A monster.”

Rainer spoke, holding his pickaxe in his hands with a subtle nervous tremble. All of them brought different farming or mining equipment as some sort of weapon to defend themselves, but it was clear none of them were actually prepared to face a beast capable of roaring with such power. It had to be so big and threatening to even make itself heard so far away. It was a

fact only few of them, the most terrified of all, realized. After a short but tense pause, the herbalist nodded and hid his hand once again, the light figures disappearing.

“Yes, it was the forest beast.” Arthur confirmed and the gasps of fear and surprise were quick to follow. “But you guys don’t have to concern yourselves with it, I will take care of everything.”

He wasn’t comfortable speaking with humans even if he technically was one. They seemed like fragile beings, easy to scare and quick to become hostile to the unknown and Arthur was so familiar to the unknown it felt like a personal attack whenever it was attacked, be it tales of wicked witches or man-eating fey beings. It was just the way things were, however, and in his travels he came to accept it. Humans and magical creatures would never live peacefully amongst each other, which is why the fey hid itself from mortal eyes. Again, that was just the way things were, but... The existence of a certain annoying bard had begun to make him doubt, but it wasn’t enough to cause Arthur’s heart to waver. He had to protect the forest.

At his core, he wasn’t human. He was the ward of the fairies; he was both protected by them and protected them, be it from cursed kings or ignorant villagers.

And yet...

“B-but it’s dangerous!” Gisela muttered, trying to shake off her mother’s hand. After a few seconds she succeeded and quickly ran towards Arthur, clutching his cape with tearful eyes. Because of it, the stain of blood on the sides of his torso was revealed to the crowd. “...! See, you got hurt!”

Ah, so annoying.

Soon, a flock of worried villagers started to gather around the sorcerer, offering treatment and other things he didn’t need. It probably was because he was already in a foul mood, but this strange and frightening worry that surrounded him started to freak him out, since he wasn’t used to this type of attention and he had an incomplete job ahead of him, so with a loud voice he demanded space and shook off the small child with a movement of his cape.

“Get out of here! I don’t have time for this, Feliciano is still in there and...!”

Whoops.

Now it wasn’t only him the victim of the villager’s worried whispers, but the bard who had yet to awaken. Gisela covered her mouth with both hands, horrified, and Hildegard’s face had lost all color as she fell to the floor. Liselotte appeared from behind her son and held the other woman’s shoulders, practically crying as well.

“He’s... He’s in there? With the monster?”

“What? The bard?”

“We have to save him!”

“No, he might be already dead!”

“But that’s not for sure, we have to do something!”

“No...” Hildegard whispered to herself. “I shouldn’t have... I shouldn’t have kicked him out. Please... Please, save him!”

Her eyes were fixated on Arthur’s figure and she began to plead with shaky hands.

Chaos had ensued and his head was ringing already. Ah, he should’ve just stayed in bed... With a quick movement and a single word, his voice had been amplified with a spell and he announced with a very angry tone:

“Shut up!” He sighed, massaging the bridge of his nose. “I will save that bard and slay the beast or whatever, but I need you people to do something for me besides shutting the hell up. I need potion ingredients. We don’t have time for this, so if you want to cooperate you better start moving, do you understand?”

Silence for a moment, and then, cheers. This surprised Arthur so much he could barely piece together what he was hearing; he was sure he would be rejected and that was his intention, scaring off with the mention of magic and potions or offending the villagers enough so they

would hide in their houses and let him work. The shouts of admiration and trust made the blonde man's cheeks turn a shy red, once again not being used to this type of feedback. He felt... A bit happy, honestly. A strange feeling of being someone others relied on, his kin.

No, no, no, they weren't his kin. He wasn't doing this for them or their praise. He was doing this for Giselle's son! Pull yourself together, Arthur! She would probably be so happy looking at him being accepted by these ignorant humans, even for a few moments and even if it was because he was doing something for them, but he didn't have time to care about it. He had work to do... But he was getting a bit carried away, he had to admit. Gisela was the only one who kept quiet, holding her mother's hand and staring directly at Arthur... No, at the woods themselves.

Meanwhile, with a nervous but somehow proud smile, Arthur announced:

"Alright, I know this place like the back of my hand so I know which herbs and ingredients can be found. Just follow my instructions and I'll resolve everything by next dawn. No, even earlier than that! We'll slay the beast and get that foolish bard back!"

—ξ⁹⁸⁸ξ—

He was really good at making potions, probably because his mother had been an expert herbalist and potion maker in her prime, and he even got help from many enthusiastic hands, so by afternoon he had prepared a plan so meticulous there was no way it would go wrong.

"Okay, I have enough weakening potions to knock out an elephant and this net is infused with a restrictive spell, I just need their help and we'll have that idiot cornered in no time..."

"Yay! But what's an elephant, mister magician?"

"I told you, I'm not a magician, I'm a sorcerer... Er, warlock... Herbalist! Let's go with that. An elephant is a majestic and giant animal with big ears and a big trunk. I saw many of them when I traveled to the East... Hey! Don't distract me, kid!"

"Hehe."

"Don't 'hehe' me either." Arthur sighed, visibly annoyed, but there was a small smile forming in his lips as they got closer and closer to the entrance of the forest. "Alright, you

will tell all the villagers to stay in their houses. If anything happens, which won't, run to the swan-shaped mountain, you hear me?"

Gisela nodded, carrying some vials in her hands while followed by Rainer, Edith and Jürgen, who all carried a gigantic net made of rope. The other villagers were preparing their houses, barricading the windows and entering the cattle to their respective barns. Just a safety measure in case his plan didn't work. Which wouldn't happen, because it was flawless! Maybe.

The three youngsters were talking to themselves, but they were mostly reassuring Rainer who had been on the verge of breaking down since the confirmation that the monster was real. Gisela, on the other hand, had a strangely calm expression.

"Mister mag... Herbalist." She said, looking up at the blonde man. "By 'their help' do you mean... The fairies?"

Arthur raised an eyebrow, wondering where she heard that until he remembered she had gotten her hands on that old storybook. After spending more time with the child, he had noticed she was more keen than other villagers and had a special affinity with magic, so it was no wonder she would somehow know they weren't just fairy tales.

"Yeah. I get along with them, so they'll do as I say."

He expected the girl to be amazed and ask questions about the fairies, like how small they were and if they really wore flower dresses, but her expression remained unchanged.

"... My name, *mutti* got it from the storybook who told the story of a fairy called Giselle. Did she really exist? ... Did she get her happy ending?"

"Yes." Arthur answered, short and concise. "She was the Primrose fairy and she got her happy ending with her sons and family."

Gisela finally smiled, clutching the vials of a bluish liquid.

It was... A half-truth. Giselle got to live in the human world and even formed a family, but her story ended tragically. However, Arthur knew what dead fairies became and he also knew Giselle well enough to be certain she would be satisfied with the experience, and now knowing she had blessed her son with such a complex and love-filled spell against all odds, he was so sure he could bet his right hand that she had been looking at them with that smug and lovely smile of hers, amazed at their story. She always liked true love stories, after all, and for better or worse, Arthur knew those two had something of the sorts going on, just like she liked.

But there was something bothering him. Not only the strangely calm demeanour of the child, but... The storybook itself. When he read it, he didn't think much about it since, well, there was a big drama unfolding in front of him, but the more he thought about it, the weirder it became. The timeline just didn't make sense. It was so old and archaic it had to be written a century before, found by the villagers that settled in forty years ago, but... It somehow had so many stories he knew firsthand were true, but so much time had passed since then its author had to be at least two hundred years old, and yet... Giselle's story, which happened during the last twenty years, was there too, like the author somehow knew it would happen. Time magic was forbidden since it drained the user's own lifespan, but he knew some fey had prophetic capacities. The author had signed the book as "*A. F. J. M. W.*" but he didn't know of any fey being who wore such long names if it was an acronym. Ahh, this would bother him the whole fight, wouldn't it?

Arthur wanted to inspect that storybook more closely and discover its secrets, but he had to prioritize Feliciano's awakening first... Or that's what he intended, but as always his plans went wrong. With a sudden movement, Arthur stopped the four villagers and raised his hand to act as a shield, a shiver tracing his spine as a giant and animalistic figure stuck out its head from between the trees.

“...!”

The Swan King himself carried a dead deer on his jaws, black feathers covering his icy blue eyes as he sniffed the air. He didn't seem to recognize Arthur since he remained serene, almost like a curious dog meeting someone for the first time. It would seem endearing to some, but for naive villagers like Rainer it was a nightmare. Falling on his back when his legs gave in, Rainer was completely paralyzed at the sight of such a giant monster. Jürgen was the first to drop the net and slowly kneel to Rainer's side, pale and shaky since they were frighteningly close.

“Stay calm.” Arthur whispered while he hid Gisela in his cape, knowing full well the panic that was devouring the youngsters’ minds right now, but he had to give it a shot. “It won’t hurt us if we don’t freak him out.”

Wishful thinking, really. The moment the monster stepped out of the shadows and its covered in blood snout brushed Rainer.

With a shriek of pure terror, Edith was the first to act and grabbed a big rock from the ground, throwing it directly at Ludwig’s head and with a loud “no!” from Arthur, it all went downhill.

“Stay away from him, monster!” She demanded, gaining a furious roar from the beast. No, it wasn’t furious, it seemed... Taken aback. Dropping the animal carcass, it stumbled backwards and shook its head, staring at the young woman that had attacked it. “Stay away!”

The beast raised its wings in a threatening motion, but in reality it was fixing its appearance once the attack had ruffled its feathers. Walking closer to Edith, the beast lowered its head and whined, but none of the present noticed save from Arthur and Gisela. When he believed his partner would be attacked, Rainer managed to pull himself together and grab another rock, bigger and sharper, and threw it too towards the monster. Jürgen quickly followed and Arthur had to take Gisela away so she wouldn’t get hurt by the monster or the stones, cursing under his breath, but he kept his confused eyes fixated on Ludwig, who didn’t seem to want to attack the villagers. No, he seemed... Hurt, not physically, but emotionally while receiving the attacks and the screams.

“Don’t touch her!”

The beast looked at the villagers with glassy eyes, using its wings to shield himself and with a quick movement, it blew a sudden gust of wind, making all three of the youngsters fall. The Swan King whined once again, looking awfully pitiful and small while staring at the way the three friends hugged each other, trying to get up and starting to run away. Ludwig saw them leave with a strangely sorrowful expression, but not even Arthur knew what the hell was going on. Why didn’t he strike back? Arthur would’ve done it if some randos attacked him with rocks, he had to admit it, but that beast... That beast seemed so genuinely heartbroken it caused a strong dissonance in Arthur’s mind. Wasn’t he supposed to be bloodthirsty and savage? What was he doing just accepting these stones? With a mere flick of his claws, Ludwig could rip to shreds all three of them, but he didn’t.

Why?

The beast retreated after exchanging glances with Arthur and Gisela and for a moment, Arthur even felt pity for it. Just a fraction of second, enough to make him smack himself in the head to stop being so emotional.

“Kid, are you okay?” He asked with a red spot in his forehead where he smacked himself.

Gisela was trembling slightly, but her green eyes were strangely clear. Not blurred with fear or confusion, instead, she just asked like she didn’t believe her own words:

“Was that really the beast?”

Arthur frowned at the question and with an anger he knew was uncalled for he snatched the vials from the child, grumbling.

“Yes, it is. I will deal with it, now go back to your house and stay there until dawn, alright? Your mother must be worried sick. I will send a magical message if everything goes smoothly. If not, pack everything and leave.”

“W-wait...! Are you going to kill it?”

“Of course!”

“B-but...”

“No buts, do as I told you or I will personally offer myself to the monster as lunch.”

“... Please, bring the Fairy Prince safe and sound. Promise me.”

Her eyes were finally tearful like a normal kid, but then again, Arthur was never a normal kid either. Maybe it had to do with the magic they had inside themselves. Who knows. Also... Fairy Prince? Annoyingly fitting for a similarly annoying man.

"I promise."

—S ۹۰۰۰۰۰—

The humming of a woman was accompanied by the sound of water moving, it was the melody he had sung so many times despite not knowing where it came from. She couldn't touch him even in that strange space they were in, she couldn't hug him or caress his face or kiss his cheeks, so she had to sing for him instead. The lyre constellation's strings were playing as well, peacefully accompanying her voice.

"Was it you who taught it to me?" Feliciano asked, sitting on that strange water mirror while Giselle hummed on the other side.

"It was a song I heard from the humans who would sometimes stumble upon the woods many, many years ago." She explained. "I heard it better when I reached the village, albeit it was years after I heard it for the first time."

"How did you get out of the forest? Didn't the curse stop you?"

"Well, it sure did. It was a theory I had, but it was the magical creatures the ones who couldn't escape. So... I tried to shapeshift into a human and sealed my magical energy, trying to trick the spell. And it worked! But I couldn't go back anymore. I never think twice before acting, I think you inherited it from me." She chuckled, but there was a deep sadness settling in her eyes. "I couldn't say goodbye to any of my sisters or even Ludwig."

The mention of his name was like a knife twisting itself in Feliciano's chest who, surprised and confused, pressed his hands against his chest in an attempt to calm his ferocious heartbeat.

"You know him? How?"

"Well, I am a fairy! I've lived in that forest for ages and I lived through many events. The arrival of the human prince was the last of them, although I do remember a certain gallant knight that also managed to reach the lake. It was before the curse, of course, and his silver hair fascinated all of us, including Elizabeta and Roderich... Those times seem so far away

now." The constellations behind her were flapping their wings and playing in the night sky, almost making a twinkling sound. "He was so young when he got cursed to stay in the lake, and even if the other fairies were terrified of him, I tried to treat him well and make his life there easier. I don't know if I succeeded, though. Despite liking them a lot, I still have yet to understand humans."

Yes, she could never understand them. She wasn't human, after all. Giselle's eyes wavered and she had to take a moment to compose herself, wearing a bitter smile.

"I failed to protect him just like I failed to protect you two, my dear children... My blessing was more akin to a curse, wasn't it? In my foolishness, I thought it would do good to both of you, but I failed to consider that you wouldn't live as fairies, but as humans. I just wanted to prevent you from suffering like I did, but I know how miserable my gift made you two." She let out a weak laugh, covering her face for a few moments. "For Lovino, I gave him insight in hopes he wouldn't be tricked, but in doing so, I made him unable to trust his fellow humans. Hearing other people's negative thoughts can become so tiring, especially at a young age. Some things are better left unsaid, but I cursed him to hear every single one of them."

His brother... Could hear other people's thoughts? It all started to make sense. His behavior, the way he somehow knew which caretakers were lying to them and which retainers were greedy and cunning. He was wise and unyielding, but he always seemed so distrustful of everyone else, like he was always on edge. He never told Feliciano any of this. So it was their mother's doing...?

"And you..." Giselle sighed heavily, placing her hands against the watery mirror in a futile attempt to reach her son. "I wanted you to know where I came from and how much beauty there was in my homeland, hoping you would someday return, so I let you wander to it in your dreams, but... I didn't have enough strength. A fey's blessing is supposed to be placed on a single person, but there were two adorable children in my arms, so I had to divide the blessing in two. Maybe that's why it didn't work properly during the first years of your life... Your dreams were scary, weren't they?"

So it was also her doing. Those terrifying dreams that haunted him at such a young age with that endless darkness.

"When fairies die, we don't stop existing. Instead, we become part of the wind as Breeze Spirits, so even after my physical body perished I was still with you. You couldn't hear or see

me, but I was always there, looking out for you and Lovino and I could see how much my blessing harmed both of you. I'm not a human, I could never foresee this... I'm sorry, Feliciano." Her voice cracked and the pearl-like tears fell onto the water that separated them, making a twinkling sound like it crashed against glass. "I should've continued to be a mere Breeze Spirit, but I couldn't bear to live knowing my precious sons were in pain because of me, so... I broke a taboo to fix what I had done wrong."

The lyre constellation played a soothing tune, ignorant of the pain the fairy on earth was going through.

"I interfered with the world instead of continuing to flow with the wind; I put a new layer to the blessing and now, I will stop existing because of it." She paused, lips curling in a sad smile once she saw her dear son's tears fall as well. Unable to reach him, Giselle caressed the water mirror on the spot where his cheeks should be. "Lovino started to hear loving thoughts as well, although they would all come from his adorable brother, and you... You connected with a similar soul, living deep in the forest that birthed me. You met *him* and you could finally see the beauty that was kept hidden somewhere far, far away, and I hoped it would spark the wanderlust I knew you had, but... Once again, I made a mistake. Lovino closed himself off to the outside world and stubbornly refused to connect with anyone but you, since all the affectionate thoughts he heard belonged to you, and... and you... Became as captivated in fantasy as your foolish mother. The real world became painful to you and what should've been a beautiful rest became all you wanted to see. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Feliciano."

It was painful to hear her. How many years was she away from her home in a strange world that tricked her? How many years did she spend there, accompanied by only three constellations that weren't even aware she existed? And why did she endure it all?

"I just... I loved you so much. In that world I idolized, I got nothing but scorn and pain instead, I was losing hope and with that, my energy grew weaker and weaker. Us fairies are emotional beings, feelings are tied to our life force and magical power, which is why we live in colonies, but I was all alone and I felt tricked. Even your father, who promised to love me left me behind, I was so hurt and... And maybe that's why the blessing became a curse." She mumbled, unable to stop her tears as she tried to reach her son through the glass. For a moment she looked so fragile and so defeated, but after a second, her voice regained its strength and determination. "But I did love you and your brother. You were the one beauty I had been looking for all this time. I was so weak I could not survive any longer, but I still wanted to give you a gift that could protect you. What I did... I swear, it was because I loved you two so much, I wanted my children to be happy."

“I know, mom.” Feliciano spoke, the dripping of water reminiscing tears, but his eyes were dry yet tender. “You tried to help us, but... Happiness is much simpler than that. It doesn’t need complex spells to achieve it. You didn’t know that. It’s alright.”

Giselle sobbed, wings shaking behind her as she unsuccessfully tried to hug her son, but they could never reach each other, and yet... She didn’t regret it. She could finally see him after so many years alone and he was the precious baby she missed so much. Several minutes passed, or maybe they were hours, but they kept each other company and heard their pleas and woes, secrets they could never tell anyone but themselves.

The swan constellation behind her, ghostly and faint, rested its head on its body as its long neck twisted while the eagle hid its head on its chest. Everything calmed down and the exhaustion became heavy on Feliciano’s shoulders, but he wouldn’t close his eyes yet.

“What will happen to you now?”

“I’m not sure.” A fairy breaking this taboo is unheard of, no one really knows what happens to one when they do it. Maybe I will stop existing altogether, but if I had to choose...” She paused, regaining her breath. Maybe it was because she was a fey creature, but even after crying her eyes out she looked dazzling. “I would like to become a star. That way, you, Lovino and all my sisters could find me when they look at the sky above. Arthur and Ludwig as well... I would like them to remember me.”

Her lips were lifted in a weak and gentle smile, contrasting against the beautiful yet cold night sky that extended behind her. This scene was the first and last time Feliciano could look at his mother, with no portraits to remember her or capture her gorgeous image. He wanted to burn her smile in his mind so he would not forget her. Maybe he could paint her, maybe he could try to reconstruct her face once he got out of there, but if he didn’t... At least he wanted to see her now.

“I will remember you. I will tell Lovino and everyone else about you, I will make sure they know how much you loved all of us. I... Always wondered why you left me and my brother behind, or how you managed to pit father against grandfather. All the rumors and whispers I heard weren’t enough to imagine you, and I...” Feliciano choked out a sob, hitting the mirror that kept him from hugging the one he had been looking for ever since he was a baby. Just like a waterfall, the words kept flowing out of his mouth as his heart started to open itself. “I resented you. I tried to believe I didn’t, but I did resent you. I hated you for leaving me, I hated father for giving up and I hated grandfather for causing everything, and I... I hated myself for still loving this wicked world that took you away. I still love the world, I just

couldn't see it, but now I do. I love it and I miss it, I miss my brother, I miss the fairies and the villagers, I miss... I miss Ludwig. I want to go back, but I don't want to leave you either. I say I will remember you, but what if I don't? What if this is another dream...? Why can't I have everything...? Am I selfish? Am I naive? I don't care if I am, I don't want to lose you or anyone else. Mom..."

How much he wanted to say goodbye with a smile, but he hated goodbyes. He wanted to give his mother the image of a dignified man, the prince he had to become and the son she deserved, but he was so childish, so spoiled and so weak. He didn't want to let go, he didn't want to give up anything. He was such a mess, always crying and always throwing a tantrum, what would his mother think...?

Suddenly, everything became clearer. Behind Giselle, the sky started to become painted in warmer colors, the arrival of dawn explaining why the constellations, which were now fading, were preparing to rest. While the sun peeked through, the Primrose fairy's figure started to become blurred and transparent like she was vanishing, but instead of looking sad or anxious, she just smiled and placed her hand on where Feliciano's forehead rested against the water floor, like she was soothing him.

"No. You aren't selfish or naive. You are just... Human. The type of human that won't settle for what his heart doesn't want. That's the type of human love I longed for, the one found in fairy tales and stories. And even if it can't come true... You will be okay. You have so much beauty surrounding you, not in the dreams I gave you, but in the world you managed to conquer. Feliciano... That's the name I gave you in hopes you would be happy even after a storm. I know you can be, since you aren't alone. I love you, Feliciano, and I'm not the only one who does. But you know that, don't you, my child?"

Feliciano finally closed his eyes and sobbed, but his chest was strangely light even if it was sorrow what he felt. He didn't want to let go, but he had to. Dreams had to stay as such and now he understood he couldn't keep clinging to them, not when he had people who waited for him to return. His mother couldn't be one of them anymore, but... It was alright.

It hurt, but he was alright now.

With a soft and genuine smile, he said goodbye as Giselle faded.

“I will look for you in the sky.”

—ξ⁹⁹⁹ξ—

The beast’s breath was uneven as it ran through the woods, feathers brushing against the trees and bushes. Blood that belonged to it fell through its face, almost like tears. If it could cry, it would.

The stones didn’t hurt. He could barely feel his body, so physical pain was not what had hurt him. No, it was their eyes. Full of hatred and terror, staring directly at him like he was a monster. Maybe he was.

He had always been one even if he didn’t look like it. As a king, his people feared him. He didn’t talk or connect with anyone but himself, so they couldn’t figure him out. Humans fear the unknown and his stern expression and rough orders didn’t help, so he was deemed as an unfriendly, terrifying and cruel ruler, but all he ever did once he ascended to the throne was to keep his kingdom safe. Despite his best efforts to make his people content, a king with a heart of stone couldn’t give them what they wanted. At least he gave them what they needed; food, shelter and beautiful scenes to look at. Yes, when he rebuilt his fallen kingdom, he made sure it would be a secure place where the unsightly pain of the outside world didn’t reach, but his intentions were clearly misinterpreted. What vanity? He knew he was an awful man with a horrible personality, he didn’t care about those things, he just wanted his people to be happy. And he considered the people of Schwanenberg as his own too, even if they weren’t his citizens, so seeing them despise him so openly and cower in fear at the mere sight of him... It was painful, even if his mind right now couldn’t figure out why his chest hurt so much.

He needed to breathe fresh air, to sink his feathers in the lake waters and rest alongside his prince. The one he meet in his dreams, the son of the fairy who always followed him around in attempts to cheer him up, the man he loved.

Ignoring the nervous fairies that received him on the meadow, Ludwig walked directly towards the sleeping bard, his steps as heavy as his heart as he whined, blood still dripping from his mouth and forehead. The brunet was in the exact same position as before, so still he almost looked like a corpse. His lips were becoming blue because of the cold of the drizzle and because he was so close to the lake itself, in which a giant nest made of sticks and mud rested, made entirely by the bird monster, but it was too afraid to hurt Feliciano to even try to

carry him to the nest, so he kept him there, close to him and surrounded by berries and fruit he had collected for the unconscious prince. Resting his snout on Feliciano's torso, the beast closed his eyes and spread his wings, trying to keep the prince warm. Ludwig whined in a low voice, not understanding why his attempts at waking him up weren't working, but thankfully his body wasn't as big as before and the rain had stopped the moment he heard Feliciano's heartbeat. It was faint, but it meant he was alive.

With a peaceful yet sad sigh, Ludwig ignored the fairies even if he heard them whisper amongst themselves and then hurriedly leave the lake, entering the woods. He didn't care about anything else, all he wanted was to sleep and stay by Feliciano's side...

But there were intruders. A single one accompanied by the sound of many small bells, a sound he recognized.

He noticed before the intruder even stepped into the sun and Ludwig raised his head once his territory was invaded. He wouldn't allow anyone to enter, not when Feliciano was still so vulnerable, so he extended his wings and growled as a warning, but Arthur just scoffed.

“Hello to you too, beast.”

#### Chapter End Notes

\* Mon cher: My dear

\* Au revoir: Goodbye

## Scène finale

### Chapter Notes

This took... So long and it is such a long chapter, more than 10k words. I thought about splitting it, but then it would send me into another procrastinating spiral and I just didn't have the heart to interrupt the flow. Plus, 10 is a good number to end a fanfiction. (〃▽〃) If I ever revise this, maybe I will split it, but for now, think of this as a treat!

Thank you so much for accompanying me to this ride full of self-indulging, unnecessarily dramatic and full of references journey. As mentioned previously, this AU still has a lot to offer, which means in the near or no-so-near future I will publish some extra chapters that center on different characters. Of course, they will be named after the Hungarian Dance, the Spanish Dance, the Neapolitan Dance, the Polish Dance and the Russian Dance from Swan Lake! And also, the Black Swan Pas de Deux... You don't need too much brainpower to know who will be the main character in these extras, so please look forward to it! (◦•◦•◦) ♡

For now, I will take an actual break to avoid worsening the artistic block and burnout that comes with the finishing year. This was a wild ride and I have no words to express how happy I am... Then again, maybe I will revise some chapters to fix spelling errors and such since I have that perfectionist streak there, but maybe it will be better to get a beta reader, who knows. (→←) That aside, thank you again for reading and I do hope you have a Christmas and New Year full of magic as well! ( \*◦\* )

A little earlier than that, that same demonic being kept mocking him in his mind, laughing with a strong “*hon*” in his voice while the herbalist ventured into the woods.

“So you accepted the help of those so-called evil humans? My, how low have you fallen, master!” The fiend laughed, a smokey figure surrounding the very pissed off sorcerer who was trying to prepare the potions. Lining them up under his robe and carrying the net with only one hand, Arthur was doing his best to not snap right there, but his patron wasn’t helping much. “But I understand, *mon cher*, might as well use what you can while you pretend to be one of them... Or do you perhaps feel human again?”

That demon was having a blast looking at everything unfold like a bystander, admiring the chaos in the front row and how Arthur seemed to waver in front of “his people.” Collecting herbs with their help and feeling the need to be praised by them, recognized and loved... A very human feeling just like the fiend liked to see. Entering the forest wrapped in shade,

Arthur made a movement and once again confined the demon to the ring, but thankfully his words still reached the sorcerer. Now, a bit annoyed and frankly offended, he said:

“Why don’t you quit your herbalist act and just use the power you accepted from me? It’s such a waste to not use it, don’t you think so? We can burn everything to the ground! Well, maybe not everything since you really like this damn place, but with just a mere whistle I could destroy that cursed beast for you... Your cute little fairies might get hurt in the process since we don’t get along, but it’s way easier to just finish the job quickly instead of using this complicated plan of yours.”

“Shut up.” Arthur muttered. “I don’t need your opinion, you’ll just do what I say and when I say it. That’s your job, stick to it.”

The fiend stopped speaking for a moment and then let out a sigh mixed with a laugh, his true thoughts being as blurry as his figure now trapped within the ring.

“Just know that I will intervene if your life is in danger. If you were to die before completing the contract I would starve, after all.”

Yes, the contract. That damn...

For better or for worse, it was a simple request. In exchange for his soul, Arthur had asked to borrow demonic power to protect the forest, but with that vague petition it could mean anything. Protect it from intruders and evil kings or protect it from the greed that had contaminated it? At the time, Arthur didn't specify since he was going through an emotional turmoil and, well, meeting a demon didn't calm his nerves, so he spouted whatever came to mind first. *“I want to become stronger to protect my family and my home!”*

And the fiend accepted. Devils from legends liked to play with the details in their favor and getting a contract with so little specifics at its core was their greatest joy because they could exploit all loopholes. However, that demon never really messed with him in that regard. Sure, he liked to argue and be as insufferable as it was physically possible, but there was not a single moment where the fiend shook the contract over Arthur's head, pointing at a minor detail that would drive him insane. No, that creepy devil was frankly quite supportive and for someone whose only exposure to demons was legends and storybooks he couldn't tell if it was normal or not. However, it worked out just fine. He couldn't hope to understand the objective of a demonic being just like he didn't understand the motives behind their first

meeting. Why did that devil decide to extend a hand to a pitiful and crying child who had to run away from all he'd ever known? Just for a single meal? Or was there something else he wanted? Who knows. It wasn't Arthur's business. He would just take what was useful and run with it.

A demon contract was a mysterious but surprisingly simple thing and sometimes he wondered if it was even necessary. Arthur could lack magic power by himself, but he was experienced enough to wield whatever small quantity of energy he had in his vessel. The only reason he made a pact in the first place was because the fiend offered it to him and he was so distressed he didn't think twice about it... Well, it was done already, so he had to live with it until he inevitably died and had to give his soul to that annoying french bastard.

“Whatever.” He mumbled, pushing those thoughts away and focusing on what was most important. He raised his free hand and he made a circular movement with it, casting a voice enhancer spell so he could call the fairies that wanted to help him. He seemed disinterested taking in account his expressionless gaze, but in his mind he was already drawing the perfect layout for his plan. That beast was protecting the unconscious body so it wouldn't leave Feliciano's side no matter how loud he was, so he was safe to call out the fairies. “Come on, I know you guys are there. Help me out! ... Last one to help me out is a rotten egg!”

With the tone that fey beings were known for, Arthur called out his family playfully despite knowing time was ticking away, but he couldn't be too hasty either. Everything had been thought out as meticulously as he could and as long as they followed his instructions, nothing could go wrong. The problem was that the fey did not like to follow instructions. He knew at least Elizabeta and Roderich would, perhaps even Tolys, but the others... He doubted it, so he had to play by their rules if it came to that.

He noticed a small glow in the distance against the darkness of the dense trees that blocked out the sunlight, which he assumed was a fairy, and he called out to it again.

“Come here.”

The glow approached him, but as it grew larger, it became clear it wasn't a fairy. It was coming from a small lamp and...

“Mister herbalist? Is that you?”

“...! What the hell are you two doing here?!” Arthur shouted once he saw the figures of both Rainer and Gisela, the latter being the one who was pulling the young man forward while holding his hand. “Are you guys insane?! Do you have a death wish?! Get out of here immediately!”

Rainer was so pale not even the warm light of the lamp could help him regain any color, which he was carrying with his free hand. It was clear he didn’t want to be there and that this cursed forest was scaring the hell out of him but Gisela had somehow managed to convince him to come. It was Gisela who seemed to be the braver one.

“Wait! We came to bring you something! Right, Rainer?”

“... I... Yeah, this...” Oh, dear, he looked like he was about to pass out. However, he seemed to power through it or at least try and hardened his expression in an attempt to look confident. With a shaky voice, he clutched the girl’s hand and he stepped forward. “I met something. She did, actually, I just saw it. When... When we ran away, we split out somehow. Jürgen and Edith were nowhere to be seen and there was this thick fog... No, it was more like smoke...”

Smoke...? Arthur’s thoughts fell onto a certain fiend that rested inside his ring, but he didn’t say anything and just waited for Rainer to finish even if he already had his own hunch.

“And then, there was this... Uh, figure? I don’t know, I couldn’t see it. It was blurry to me.”

“I did see it!” Gisela intervened. “I saw it. It was like a man made of smoke, it was really spooky. It was really tall and it had something like horns on its head, like a goat. I couldn’t see its face, but it seemed sad.”

The mention of horns made Rainer flinch, but he closed his eyes and muttered something to himself, probably to calm down.

“Yes, she told me after it happened... That, uh, man gave us this.” Letting go of Gisela’s hands, he reached for something inside his pocket and showed it to Arthur who swore air had abandoned his lungs once he saw it was the primrose necklace. However, it wasn’t the one he remembered; the gemstones were red instead of blue, something that made his skin crawl.

“How...?”

“I believe this is the necklace my grandfather found all those years ago... Ah, you probably don’t know the story, but... Well, it’s a long one, I know you don’t have the time, so let’s go straight to the point so we can get out of here. What did that figure say, Gisela?”

“It said something like... ‘Purify it.’ But we don’t know how to do that, so we thought you could know since you are...” A sorcerer, he completed in his mind.

Rainer seemed to be hesitant about letting go of the necklace, but he extended it towards Arthur anyway so it could be inspected. Arthur took it with one hand and stared at it for a moment he felt eternal. There was no doubt, it was Giselle’s necklace, but it was so contaminated it was physically heavy. He knew that red glow so well he didn’t have to even invoke the fiend’s name to accuse him. That damn demon... It had to be his doing. If it wasn’t, why was Giselle’s necklace so contaminated with demonic energy?

“What’s this?” The demon spoke in his mind and he sounded genuinely surprised. “Why is my magic infused in that ugly thing?”

Annoying! So damn annoying!

“How should I know?” Arthur retorted without thinking and once Gisela and Rainer stared at him like he was a madman, he sighed. “I will purify it or whatever, but for the love of the stars get out of here. The beast will not forgive you twice.”

Rainer seemed convinced and clutched the lamp in his hand, urging Gisela to leave already, but she didn’t even blink and directed her bright green eyes against Arthur’s, like she was trying to peer into his deepest thoughts. Arthur, meanwhile, was doing his best to remain calm and keep his thoughts in order even if he wanted to grab the demon by the horns and force him to answer all his questions at once.

“What are you looking at, kid?”

“Are you sure?”

“Am I sure of what?”

“The beast, I mean. Are you sure he won’t forgive twice?”

“... What the hell are you talking about, kid? Of course not!”

“Yeah, Gisela, please, just let’s get out of here. We dropped off the necklace, we should go back... Huh?”

“Huh?” Indeed.

The tiny fey glows appeared like instruments presenting themselves in a symphony, one by one and letting each of them get the attention they deserve. Too flashy, honestly, the surprise in the three human faces was as evident as the sun going down.

“...! Y-you guys...!” Arthur said, baffled, as he watched how the fairies revealed themselves in front of two common humans who were of course with their jaws wide open. “What are you doing?”

Elizabeta was the first to answer. Smiling softly and holding Roderich’s hand, she said:

“Helping you, of course. Didn’t you ask for our help?”

“W-well, yeah, but...”

“If you are worried about these two individuals,” Roderich started, “fear not. They are not dangerous, I made sure of it.”

“W-what is this? What are those bugs?” Rainer mumbled, almost stumbling backwards in shock.

“... But they sure are rude, huh.”

“Bugs? Jeez, that was, like, so rude!” The Poppy fairy argued, hands on his hips and a very angry expression but as always, he was hiding behind someone. This time it was Tolys’ turn to serve as his barrier. “Aren’t you a good human? What’s with that attitude, huh? Don’t make me regret appearing in front of that hideous human face.”

“You don’t have to be mean about it, Feliks...”

“Oh, shut it! He was mean first!”

Of course, Rainer couldn't answer that since he started to pinch his cheeks, checking if he was dreaming or not while the lamp in his hand almost fell to the floor, but it was caught by a spell pronounced by Roderich himself. Gisela on the other hand had her eyes wide open, both with surprise and fascination.

“I... I knew it, fairies were real...!”

“Well, duh. Of course we're real, we've been here, like, longer than your grandparents lived! Is grandparent the right word?” Feliks whispered to Tolys who nodded as a response. “Heh! I'm the smartest, aren't I?”

Gisela covered her mouth for a second, probably to avoid screaming and screeching due to her excitement, and she gently lifted the ends of her skirt as she bowed.

“H-hello, fairies! This is my friend Rainer and I am Gisela, we are honored to be in thy presence!”

She recited that last part, which she learned in the fairytale book.

“Gisela?” Elizabeta pronounced, fluttering towards her, and covered her mouth with a hand. Those who knew the person who originally wore that name needed no explanation for her sudden change of expression, but of course neither young man nor girl understood why the pretty fairy suddenly seemed to be on the verge of tears. Well, maybe Gisela did. “It's... It's a beautiful name.”

The girl pressed her lips together, the flow of magic resulting both familiar and fascinating to her; this was the first time she felt it so clearly thanks to the presence of fey beings, so she couldn't help but be carried away.

“Are you guys going to fight the beast? Can I come too?” As a smart young girl, she already knew the answer but she wanted to test her luck anyway. Of course, the expression on Arthur's face was enough to make her look down. “I just...”

“Quit it, kid. You have to return home.” He said, having lost all his remaining patience. He still couldn't believe the forest fairies had actually revealed themselves to humans, but he couldn't ask them about it yet. With a gesture, he invoked a gust of wind that pushed the two villagers slightly. “I won't be able to rescue Feliciano if you keep wasting my time. I appreciate you two returning the necklace to me, but I will take care of everything.”

Rainer, despite being noticeably fascinated as well, held a strong protective instinct and having to watch over a child only accentuated it, so he pushed aside any childlike curiosity and he nodded, taking Gisela's hand.

“We'll leave it to you. If you make it out alive... Be sure to visit the village, Arthur. We are all worried about you guys.” Although faintly, Rainer smiled at the very surprised sorcerer.

Gisela was still unsure about leaving, but once the Rue fairy sighed and fluttered towards her with Feliks by his side, he whispered something in the girl's ear that made her grin from ear to ear. Feliks, despite still looking timid, also smiled at her.

“Y-you promise, mister fairy?”

“Yes. Once everything is done, come to the woods. We have a lot to show you.”

“And with whose permission are you inviting a human girl?” Arthur interfered, but a sudden laughter in his head sent shivers down his spine.

*“Tick, tock, master. The little bard's clock is running out of time...”*

“Argh, damn it... Alright! Get out of here, now! Since you two are so keen on making friends with her, go escort them to make sure they don't die on the way out.”

Feliks and Tolys were noticeably surprised, but after a second of consideration, the blonde fairy nodded with enthusiasm and began to fly through the trees. He had to be controlled by Tolys so Rainer and Gisela wouldn't be left behind. After waving goodbye, the two villagers disappeared into the woods while Arthur, Roderich and Elizabeta stayed behind. Arthur was so mentally and emotionally exhausted he had to take a minute to recover.

Roderich was the first to break the silence.

“So...” He said, fixing his glasses. “You have a plan, don't you?”

“Of course I do.” Arthur raised an arm and pointed at the net on the floor, at the same time allowing the fairy to see the many potions he had clinging to his chest.

Elizabeta, after calming down, also spoke out and stood on the ground next to the net, resting her wings.

“It has... A restraining spell imbued in it? Are you planning to restrain him, not kill him?” She asked, hopeful eyes caving into Arthur.

He didn't return her gaze and even if the two fairies already suspected the change of heart in Arthur, he wouldn't admit it out loud.

“Just help me prepare the trap, will you?”

Elizabeta smiled in relief as Roderich just shrugged, accepting this turn of events as inevitable.

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The sun was beginning to set.

No fairies were around. No one would witness the exchange. They were all in their respective positions, Arthur was now even more alert than usual so he could pinpoint even the smallest ant around them. However, he was still not serene enough. How could he be? He had to clear this one question that threatened to throw his mind into such chaos it would be impossible to

even follow the first step of the plan. Raising a hand to cast a small soundproof barrier, he practically threw his ring at the ground in a fit of rage.

“Answer me right this instant. Why on Earth is your disgusting magic infused in this necklace?!”

The demon groaned like he was in pain and his figure had been invoked by force. The smoke formed a masculine figure that seemed to yawn, raising one of its arms like it was uninterested.

“Well, how would I know? Ever since establishing a pact I have been glued to you, master.” He said, letting out a sigh as his blurry figure flew around the sorcerer. Judging by his tone, he was deeply amused by this demonstration of anger. “Maybe I’m so powerful my influence reached even the deepest caves... How funny, I didn’t expect that. Isn’t that so funny? I think it’s hilarious.”

Arthur wasn’t laughing, of course. In fact he was even angrier than before.

“*Francis!*” He pronounced and it seemed like smoke began to pour out of his mouth as he contaminated his voice with the demonic sound of a fiend’s name. The moment he was called, the demon’s figure became somewhat clearer and golden marks similar to runes were drawn around his neck like it was a collar. Well, it kind of was; a sign of a pact. “Answer me.”

Francis’ floating form had been violently thrown to the ground, to Arthur’s feet once his name was used. This didn’t please him in the slightest, but he had to obey. The power wasn’t in his favor at that moment and he now knew Arthur was more sensitive about this matter than he anticipated.

“It is true that once we made a pact I became your servant and devil...” He started, becoming more humane as he spoke. “However, only an idiotic fiend would offer his whole being to a single human and alas, I’m no idiot.”

Of course. Why would he expect a devil to play fair?

“Oh, but that isn’t something about fairness, *mon cher*. It’s something about survival. As a human, a commoner and a sinner you would know it better than I do.” Francis chuckled, barely pulling himself together. Even when he was forced to kneel he still found the strength to be absolutely insufferable. “Just like you have plan A and plan B I have my own measures to ensure my own survival. If you were to die, the pact would fail and I would return to normal, right? Wrong!”

He stood up like nothing happened, but he couldn’t float anymore. The runic collar around his neck prevented it.

“If that was possible, devils would do anything to get their humans killed as fast as possible without completing the pact. We wouldn’t waste time and we would have a quick meal, but of course we can’t have nice things... When we make a pact, it’s not only servitude and loyalty what we offer.” He shook his head almost like it was a shame. “It’s our own existence that is at risk, why else would we go to such lengths to protect our dear human?”

Arthur felt a chill run down his spine as the devil grew closer to him.

“... To ensure the pact is completed?”

“*Très bien!*” He clapped his hands so condescendingly Arthur wanted to punch him, but he knew it was fruitless. “But that’s too much of a gamble and we often divide ourselves as a back-up plan. It isn’t the most optimal solution, since we would lose our memories and most of our powers if we were to be forced to use that back-up as our main body, but it’s better than ceasing to exist. My own back-up must have been playing around and accidentally messed with a few things while he was bored, or maybe he was lonely, I don’t know. I’m not him.”

Using his right hand to caress Arthur’s cheek, the foggy limb passed right through the sorcerer and it tickled his skin, holding no warmth. The blond’s hair was moved slightly by the movement and the moonlight’s reflection on the golden locks pleased Francis to no end.

“Why... Why would you even go around making pacts if it’s so dangerous?” Arthur asked and it made Francis laugh out loud.

In return, the fiend chuckled. So naive! So endearing! So very, very foolish!

“Why do humans leave the comfort of their homes to hunt for food if it’s so dangerous?” Arthur could hear the smirk in Francis’ voice as he added: “For me it’s more romantic than that, though. Souls are tasty, sure... But it’s the unhealthy yet appealing nature of you humans that pulls me closer. Seeing how you laugh, cry, love and hate in such a short amount of time... It’s fascinating. Being able to admire such great misfortune is worth the risk.”

Arthur didn’t know why, but he couldn’t quite believe that. It didn’t seem genuine, which was strange because he had already used the fiend’s name and it forced him to speak with the truth, but he could sense he omitted a detail. A secret. Francis’ wasn’t allowed to lie but he sure could avoid giving the whole truth, so Arthur had to be smart with his questions. However, they couldn’t keep this charade any longer. It wasn’t only the sorcerer who sensed a fey presence getting closer.

“Your dear Tulip friend is arriving, so I will retire to my chambers. Whenever you call for me, oh, master, I shall be there.”

The figure disappeared and the soundproof barrier was called off just as the small glow of the fairy appeared from through the woods. She seemed uneasy, like she sensed a demonic energy, but she didn’t say anything about it, probably because she wasn’t really sure about it.

“Arthur? Are you alright?”

“... Yes, sorry. I was just... Collecting my thoughts.”

It wasn’t really a lie.

“Did you prepare the trap?” He asked, receiving a smile and a nod from Elizabeta’s part.

Behind her, Roderich appeared with a tired face like he had to carry a boulder when in reality he barely did anything. Elizabeta was the stronger of the two and they could use magic anyways, but for some reason the Edelweiss fairy was quick to fall to exhaustion. Not that it

was unusual; in general, fairies were really fragile physically, which was another reason Arthur was so keen on protecting them from humans.

“The trap is ready. What’s the plan? Will you lure him out? If you expect us to do it...”

“Of course I won’t, do I look like a fool to you?”

“...”

“... Don’t answer that.”

“I wasn’t going to. So, what’s the plan?””

“Whatever. Let’s go, I’ll tell you on the way.” Arthur sighed, starting to walk towards the lake as he waited for the fairies to follow him, which they did almost instantly. “I will anger him so he’ll follow me to the trap itself, but I will need you two to throw the net on him when I give the order.”

But he didn’t feel comfortable doing that, somehow. He was a bit confused with himself. Had it been the him from before, the childish him, he wouldn’t feel this out of place with his own family. Somehow, he didn’t know how to speak with them, maybe it was the time they spent apart and the fact they had to save someone’s life, but he was still uneasy. The forest wasn’t even welcoming him either, it wasn’t like when he was younger and he could feel the affection the trees felt for him. Maybe it was because he made a pact with a fiend. Maybe he would regain the connection later, in better circumstances. Maybe when he kicked out the beast, everything would go to how things were before. If he actually lost his connection to the enchanted lake that nurtured him, if it didn’t welcome him anymore...

Elizabeta seemed to notice this shift in his mood and, quick as always, she changed the topic, placing her hands together as she weakly fluttered around the sorcerer until she sat on his shoulder to rest.

“What if we use a codeword like when we played with Giselle? A word that none of us really use, so we’ll know it is the codeword. Then when Arthur shouts it, we’ll instantly set the trap up!”

“Eliza, that is a foolish idea.”

“Oh, come on, Roderich! It might be fun! We need to have fun in dire conditions, us fairies can’t spend too much time frowning...” She chuckled when she saw Roderich frown in response and patted the blonde man’s shoulder with her hand. “How about we say ‘pastry’? Do you like it, Arthur?”

So they were going to chit-chat on the way... He felt so tired, so strangely angry. At who? The beast? The idiot bard? The fairies? Himself? Who knows! But he sure wasn't in the mood for the whimsical nature of the fey, so he didn't even humor the Tulip fairy and answered with a sharp tone which clearly surprised her. This was a tone reserved only for humans and fiends, but the latter's words had sent his whole being into a spiral of chaos.

“Absolutely not.”

“But... But Arthur, you used to like codewords!”

“Well, I don't like them now!” He shouted, perhaps a bit too loud; he didn't even hear the waterfalls in the distance they were closing. “I'm not a child anymore, I have no use for stupid games. We have work to do, don't we? Let's focus on that, but oh, it might be a bit difficult for you two since all you ever do is play around, right? Will you be able to complete this single task? I bloody hope so.”

It didn't take him long to know his tone and words weren't appropriate. Not only that, they weren't even truthful to how he really felt, but he was so on edge he couldn't stop once he began taking his anger out on Elizabeta, something Roderich thankfully stopped. Blocking his way and extending his long wings, the Edelweiss fairy's expression was frankly scary even the herbalist who was so much bigger stopped in his tracks.

“Watch that tone of yours.”

The unfriendly glare and absolute displeasure of seeing his good friend be berated like that made it clear to Arthur: he had messed up. Feeling the color drain from his face as he realized this out of character attitude towards his family was not only unfair but also cruel. The cruelty of humans who viewed the fey's nature as something idiotic and unreliable. No, that wasn't what he wanted to say, he didn't mean it, he...

“I... I...”

“Hey, i-it's alright! We are all tense from worry, I get it. I'm worried too, I understand.” Elizabeta said, trying to make peace between the two, but Arthur could tell she was hurt.

He wanted to apologize and explain himself, but the air's moisture began to become a drizzle and, oh... They heard a pitiful whimper.

The beast's mood had worsened and rain would follow. If they didn't act now, the fairies would be unable to help him. And by fairies, he meant not only Tulip and Edelweiss, but the ones that appeared with their shaky glows, crossing the line that separated woods and meadow to practically cling to the herbalist.

“Arthur!”

“It's Arthur, you came back...”

“Eliza, Eliza, please, help the human!”

“Eliza, Roderich, help the humans!”

“You guys...!” Arthur mumbled, counting the fairies as precisely as he could, but they were so nervous they moved like hummingbirds and he lost count. He saw Anya, Chiara, Isabel and many others practically begging for help not for themselves, but... The two humans. “What happened?”

Chiara was too scared and worried to actually speak and make any sense while Anya seemed generally uninterested, so it was Isabel who took the lead as she always did.

“It's Feliciano.” She said, nervously fixing the carnation petals that shaped her skirt. “Even if we don't know much about humans, we can tell... The drizzle and moisture of the air near the lake... They are lowering his body temperature way too much.”

And it wasn't only that, both Roderich and Arthur realized it. The spell put him to sleep, disconnecting his soul from his body... It was a side effect from a soulless body. He was slowly dying.

“That's... Damn!” Arthur cursed, the gravity of the situation hitting him like a ton of bricks to the face. He already knew it was dangerous, but... The prospect of death never really sunk in until now. “Ok. Ok, change of plans, we can't drag him away either, that would waste too much time, so we have to bring the net with us. Elizabeta, I... Please, tell the others the plan, the net, I... I have to...”

She stared at him for a single second and she smiled softly, a bit sadly, even.

“Yes, we’ll be alright. Go.”

He felt his heart ache once he heard those words, feeling like they meant something deeper, but he couldn’t ask about it. Not yet. Nodding once, he placed his hand on his chest to feel the vials hanging from it and he walked towards the lake as some fairies followed instructions Elizabeta gave them while Roderich began to concentrate on using a spell, probably one to bring the net closer. The beast had already heard him before he even stepped into the fading sunlight, something that somehow made him both smile and scoff at the same time.

“Hello to you too, beast.”

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He had to change plans so naturally, he approached the beast in a careful way. If he could reason with it... The sun was going down and soon night would embrace the whole forest, transforming Ludwig into a human capable of reasoning, so he had a better chance at establishing dialogue with him during the night. He had to buy some time too so the fairies could bring the net, so he had to be as passive as he could.

Lifting his hands to show he was not aggressive, Arthur lowered his head slightly.

“Easy there, I’m not here to hurt you or your... Partner.” He muttered that last word once his gaze befell on Feliciano’s sleeping figure.

He looked like a corpse resting on his tomb with that many flowers around him, almost like he was preparing to return to the earth. The fact the sorcerer was looking at the bard did not go unnoticed and the feathered monster growled under its breath, threatening the man.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay, I won’t do anything!” The herbalist said, but he was actually frightened. It was the first time he was so close to death since the incident with fire, and even then, it wasn’t a corpse that he saw. Even if he knew this wasn’t a dead person, he still couldn’t shake the fear off his chest. “Easy there.”

Fire was violent, but it could also be kind. It took his mother away from him and it also ended someone from his family, a dryad, but in his journey, he also understood the sacred and purifying implications it had. He didn’t fear it, not anymore. But death’s chilly touch...

It was gentle. Too gentle it was off putting. If he didn’t know any better, he could think Feliciano was merely sleeping and would wake up in time, but he knew there was a possibility he wouldn’t. Heat would abandon his body completely and in silence, if he didn’t pay attention, that life could slip through his fingers without even having time to react. This life, the one his dear friend gave her own life to protect, the one belonging to someone who was too kind and too naive. Life...

“Easy... Can you recognize me? I think you don’t.”

The beast lowered its wings for a second, like it was listening. The sun had completely disappeared and the moon began to rise, her influence starting to shrink the Swan King as he was becoming more human.

“Hey, if you can understand me... Please, let’s talk this through. You can hate me and I can hate you, but we have to save Feliciano.” Arthur began to speak in a soft yet shaky voice. “If you become human again, you can save him and even save yourself. That’s a win-win situation if I’ve ever seen one, so calm down and let’s talk.”

The beast’s dark snout trembled as it sniffed the air, finding a faint scent of herbs in it. He knew these herbs, he knew they were good for sleeping, it was called... Dreamer’s Herb. He could smell something else he couldn’t give a name to. He could smell it all over Arthur and he could smell tiny beings made of it, carrying something that also had that scent and getting closer and closer to him.

This scent... He didn't know what it was, but he knew one thing. It was dangerous. It was harmful. It was... Magic.

Fueled by the instinct to protect, the Swan King let out an egregious roar that made Arthur practically fall to his knees due to the pitch and raw power, covering his ears. The beast attacked him as if it was taking advantage of it, but the sorcerer was better prepared this time. With a swiftness he didn't know he had, Arthur reached one of the vials he had brought with him and emptied its contents right into the beast's snout as he rolled to avoid the attack; it was a sticky substance, Dreamer's Herb nectar in its purest form. Normal villagers just crushed the leaves and drank it as infusions, but the nectar had even stronger sleeping properties that even smelling it had a weakening effect. The moment the liquid's scent filled his nostrils, the Swan King could feel his limbs growing weaker and his mind getting groggier. If his strength was fueled by his emotions, then if he was sleepy he wouldn't feel that intense, right?

But one single potion wasn't enough, the monster sent a blow anyway once it found its footing again. A deadly attack taking in account the increasing size of its sharp claws and the murderous intent it had.

It didn't land, however. The sorcerer had disappeared and the smell of magic made the beast groan. What he attacked instead was one of the trees that thankfully belonged to no dryad. If it did, it would mean another casualty, because the strength used was so great the trunk had practically been violently cut in half. Verifying no trunk pieces had fallen near the sleeping bard, the Swan King tilted his head to check on him for a moment before searching for the intruder.

Followed by a golden trail, the complex teleportation spell that practically exhausted his magic saved Arthur's life, who now face to face with death was trembling from head to toe. Nonetheless, he maintained his cool as much as he could, priorities as straight as the now gone tree. With the last bit of magic his vessel contained, he enhanced his voice to shout while he threw another one of his potions, this time with vial included:

“P-pastry!!”

The flask broke once it came into contact with the feathered beast and this time it wasn't a sticky substance, but a more gas-like potion. A blinding one, the moment the gas covered his eyes, the Swan King had to close them shut as they began to itch. When he opened them

again, it was as if there was not a single light in that place, something that disoriented him for a moment until he began to furiously sniff the air to guide himself. What he saw or, well, sniffed was alarming to say the least.

The same small beings full of that dangerous power had somehow gotten closer without him realizing. They were flying on top of him and they had let fall something on his body, causing him to fall and be binded to the ground. The Swan King didn't understand what was happening, but he kept fighting even under such exhaustion and blindness, but that thing that was now weighing him down was too unnaturally heavy.

“That was... That was scary as hell.” The sorcerer mumbled after a second and many bell-like voices followed him, saying things the Swan King couldn't quite understand as he tried to free himself, thrashing about like a wild monster.

He kept going on for a few minutes until exhaustion began to get the better of him; the feathers began to disappear and his figure became more and more human-like, the restrictive net and weakening potions doing what they intended.

“Is it... Is it done?” A feminine voice asked. Another one answered in a whisper and the other bells seemed to celebrate. “He's becoming human, he's Ludwig again...!”

Steps towards him made the half-beast half-human tremble as he growled pitifully like a wounded animal.

“It's ok, I won't do anything. I won't kill you, I... I can't do it.” The herbalist whispered. “Just, just become human and kiss the guy, will you?”

A small fey creature fluttered towards the Swan King, smelling like chamomile flowers, but she didn't say anything and because he couldn't see anything, he didn't know what her expression was like. The herbalist came closer and closer until he was kneeling in front of the monster.

“Everything will be over after that. Everything. It will all go back to how things used to be, just...”

The Swan King had been defeated...

“...?!”

*Rip!*

Like it was nothing but a leaf, the net made of rope was ripped apart and the feathered beast gained twice the size once the intruder was close enough and the Swan King dealed a killing blow.

Blow that did not land either, but this time it wasn't because the herbalist dodged it.

Hidden among shadows and smoke, the primrose necklace was pulled from Arthur's pocket by a shadow hand, seeming as if it was controlling the herbalist like a puppet. From the necklace a figure emanated, its smell as nasty as the one of rotting flesh. Ludwig could hear the bell creatures scream in terror and the herbalist curse, but none of those voices were as strong and terrifying as the one that filled his mind. A voice that he could only describe as demonic.

*“So close! But I can’t let you do that. Not to my master.”*

## — ፳ ፻፭፭፭፭፭ ፳ —

Ludwig thought it would hurt. Even if he didn't know anything about magic, the beast's instincts were really clear; that shadow figure was dangerous. However, once it finally intruded in his mind, it didn't attack him or torture him like he expected it to. Instead, a calm and masculine voice chuckled and said "*I will show you what you couldn't see before.*" Like it was helping him. Was it really a demonic being? Maybe it was tricking him?

“Well... If it is, then I guess I am screwed.”

Since he was now standing in an endless void.

He couldn't tell if he couldn't see anything because there was no light or because everything around it was just black. Whenever he raised his hands and tried to feel anything around him he was met with just air and whenever he took a step to try and reach the end of the void it just kept going. Plus, the ground was too strange to actually walk. It was like stepping on air, so he didn't feel safe traveling blindly.

Maybe that fiend was really torturing him, anyone would go insane in this situation, but... Not Ludwig. He was already crazy by this point, wasn't he? Just giving in and accepting the monster, allowing it to control his body even if his rationality told him it was a bad idea. He knew that, and yet... The moment he saw that sorcerer hold onto Feliciano's motionless body, it was as if his soul had been torn into pieces.

He hadn't felt such despair since he learned his older brother had perished in battle, and even now he thought he could be at least more prepared to face it, but alas, the pain of losing someone you love was too much to handle.

Someone he loved...

Did he really have to lose more people he cared about? Hadn't he suffered enough? Didn't he repent already? Fifty years all alone with only his mistakes haunting him. Was this really necessary?

... Maybe it was.

Justice was fair, she wouldn't let her heart be swayed by a beast's pathetic pleading. If she considered he had to keep suffering, then so be it.

Ludwig closed his eyes even if it didn't make a difference and took a deep breath. This was alright, he was no stranger to loneliness. Between an empty lake and an endless void the only difference was what he saw, but in the end he felt the same crushing emptiness occasionally interrupted by pleasant dreams. Not like this one, it was more like a nightmare... What was he supposed to see? That fiend didn't tell him anything else... Mhm? What was that? Somehow, there was a figure in front of him, but it was so dark it blended with everything else. It wasn't until it moved that he noticed it.

"There you are!" The figure spoke and he recognized the voice; this was the demon who had made a pact with Arthur. Walking... No, floating towards Ludwig, the fiend's true figure was being revealed... Or at least, it was an alternative form to the smoky one he usually had. "So you are *the* Ludwig, huh. I couldn't peek at you properly from that stuffy ring, but you don't look half as bad as I thought you would."

The demon now had a face and a tangible body and he almost looked human. Almost, because he still had ram horns on top of his head and that wasn't something a normal human had. With light brown hair and violet eyes, this was an objectively handsome man whose smile was akin to a devil's on its way to tempt whatever poor soul they took an interest in, however, Ludwig was not impressed. In fact, he had the urge to rip that man's beard with his own hands and he couldn't tell if it was because of the beast instincts or because it was annoying to see that fiend chuckling to himself like he did something good or funny. Maybe it was because he wore flashy clothes belonging to a noble of his fallen kingdom, he would recognize that annoying dark blue color anywhere. Prussian blue, a shade lost to time.

"Who are you?"

"Oh, *non, non*. I can't tell you my name since it's the property of my master now, but I can tell you one thing: I know much more than any fey you spent time with, so you can use this time you have to ask me whatever you want to know. I'll give you much better answers than what those pesky fairies could give you in fifty years." He extended his arms ceremonially, with sharp nails that looked like claws and a demonic tail curling behind him. It was clear that the demon had some unsolved beef with the creatures of the enchanted lake, but Ludwig couldn't care less. "So go ahead, ask whatever your heart desires!"

Ludwig scoffed. If he were to attack a demon in what he assumed was his realm, nothing good would come out of it.

"Get me out of here." He said, since it was his priority.

After all, he had to save Feliciano, and even if he still wasn't sure how since Arthur didn't get to tell him, he would tear out his heart if it was necessary. Somehow, the fiend seemed to know what was going through Ludwig's mind.

"But I can't do that." And he seemed to be incredibly amused by it, but before Ludwig could even think about punching the demon in the face, he raised a hand that started to vanish in a black smoke. As he spoke, his body changed as well, traveling through the air to place his hands on Ludwig's shoulders and disappear once again. "Let me explain. You can't get out of here since it isn't a place per se. It's... Mn, a timeless space? A memory, perhaps? You need to wake up on your own accord. I'm only here to lend you a hand and cheer you on. Aren't I good-hearted? Oh, don't look at me like that, you're scary."

If that demon couldn't help him, then what was the point?

"Is this another trick? Did the sorcerer tell you to do this? To keep me locked up here so Feliciano dies?"

"*Mon Dieu*, no! Arthur would never do that, much less to *her* son. Despite how he looks and acts he's a real softie." He sneered as the smoke abandoned Ludwig's shoulders and the demon started to float above him, carefree. "He had this foolish plan that didn't work out, so I had to step in to avoid bloodshed. He wanted to weaken the beast part so he could talk things through with you at last, but as always nothing ever goes as planned for him. How pitiful!"

Well... At least someone was laughing. After a solid minute in which the fiend finally calmed down, he reappeared in front of Ludwig, but this time, he had a female form, hair plucked into a bun and rosy lips curved in a somewhat melancholic smile.

"Primroses sure are beautiful, don't you agree? I bet you can't, since *ma chère* Giselle made sure you erase herself from your mind."

"What...?"

"Oh, please. I know you reacted to her name before and I know you reacted now, you just don't know why. Poor thing." She sighed, a beautiful and soothing voice accompanying the apparent pity. "As always, the fey take away the role of evil beings from us devils..."

The demon mumbled something about losing her brand and whatnot, but Ludwig wanted to go straight to the point so he interrupted her.

“You are not making any sense.”

“Well, let me put it another way. Do you really believe not a single fairy spared you a glance? For all those fifty years? The Tulip one did wait for some years before approaching you, didn't she? But deep inside, it feels as if something was off. Like a puzzle piece is missing.”

“How do you...?”

“This is your mind, Ludwig. I can see everything you experienced like I am reading a book, even the erased parts.” The demon shrugged like Ludwig was a confused child she had to deal with. “And because it's what my master asked me to do, I will show you exactly what I saw, but not necessarily in the order it happened, since I think it's more fun that way.”

And with a quick movement, she snapped her fingers and disappeared among laughs belonging to both a feminine and a masculine voice, smoke blinding Ludwig for a moment before being greeted by absolute silence.

“Where...? Hey!” He called out, but the demon didn't answer. “Come on...”

Now he was left alone, answerless and knowing damn well time was ticking away in the real world. Then again, magic was weird as hell, maybe in this place time didn't pass? But if it did, then soon dawn would come and with that... It would be too late to save Feliciano. It didn't matter if Ludwig couldn't be saved from the curse, but Feliciano didn't do anything wrong. Why did he have to go through this just because he stumbled into the lake, finding an ugly duckling all alone and pitying it? If this was what lady Justice wanted, then she was very wrong.

“Sniff... Hic, someone... Help me...”

Suddenly, he heard someone sob like an echo across the black space surrounding him.

“It's so dark... I don't like it! *Nonno, nonno!* Hic, *fratello!* Help me! I'm scared...”

A boy.

Following his cries, Ludwig started to waltz his way through the abyss, his steps becoming more confident as he heard the child's cries closer and closer until he finally saw him. Like a star in a sea of darkness, the boy's white nightgown stood out so much he almost emitted light. He was so small his age couldn't pass the single digits. With brown hair and a wild curl popping from his head, he tried to wipe his tears with his hands, covering his face while his shoulders trembled with every sob. It was heartbreaking to say the least. Ludwig already had a weak heart for small and weak beings, so encountering a helpless kid all alone in this terrifying void instantly made him kneel to his height and speak with his softest tone, something he didn't even realize just like he didn't realize he didn't make a sound.

“Are you lost?”

What are you saying, Ludwig, of course he's lost. Already regretting every word he pronounced, he didn't have time to dwell on it, since the moment he tried to place a hand on the child's head in an attempt to comfort him, the scenery changed. Without a warning, the void had been replaced by blinding light and it forced Ludwig to shut his eyes, not expecting the sudden brightness. Once he managed to open them up again, however, he was left stunned as he recognized this place. Of course it had to be the damn lake.

It was just like he remembered it, but well, it never really changed. It stayed almost frozen in time, unaffected by the years. The faraway waterfalls kept singing like they always did and the leaves were moving with every small breeze, it was... Like he was back in the real world.

Of course, something was different. The intruder was still there, but he stopped crying and instead was now admiring everything around him. Spinning in place, the child didn't seem to notice the stranger and instead was staring in awe at the lake, mesmerized by its clear waters and dreamlike surroundings. He wasn't crying anymore, which was a relief, but he still seemed too shy to even try and inspect the place.

Once Ludwig looked at him closer, however, he recognized him instantly. He could recognize those amber eyes anywhere even if they belonged to a younger version of him; Ludwig then understood everything.

“Feliciano.” He tried to speak, but not a single sound abandoned his mouth. Surprised by this, Ludwig tried again and took a step forward, breaking a small branch under his foot.

He observed how the kid flinched once he finally noticed Ludwig and his timid eyes looked up towards the stranger. However, instead of seeming relieved to see someone else, the small boy took a step back and started to cry again.

“E-eek! Who are you?”

Ludwig tried to talk, but again not a single word was spoken. Frustrated, his expression hardened with every second he unsuccessfully communicated and this only made the small Feliciano feel even more scared.

“I, I’m sorry!” He said with a sniffle.

This wasn’t what Ludwig wanted to happen, but he couldn’t do much about it. If he couldn’t speak and he lacked the ability to express himself with his face, he would only freak out Feliciano even more. What else could he do...? *What did he do before?*

Looking down, Ludwig noticed some flowers growing near them. He knew what they were, those glowing flowers with healing properties. They were pretty too, maybe he could use this.

He started to pluck them from the ground much to Feliciano’s confusion and proceeded to tangle the stems together with a frown of concentration. Before he noticed, Feliciano was leaning towards him even if he was still intimidated, but a child’s curiosity easily outweighed their sense of fear.

“What are you doing?”

He didn’t respond for obvious reasons and kept focusing on his task. In a matter of minutes, it was done... poorly, but done nonetheless. Extending the small gift to the child, he tried to

smile but he knew it wasn't exactly a work of art, something that hurt his still tangible pride. With his clumsy hands he made (or at least tried to) a flower crown.

"...! For me?" Small Feliciano asked, surprise winning against fear. He accepted the crown and held it with both his hands, looking at it for a second before letting out a smile. "It's really pretty! You are kind, after all."

Placing it in his head, the boy who now seemed like he was never intimidated walked towards the lake and leaned towards it so he could see his reflection in the water. Ludwig followed him without realizing and his eyes fell to the reflection as well, but what he saw made him frown. It was... Him, but younger. Probably the same age as Feliciano and wearing the clothing he wore in his childhood years.

"I love it, thank you!" Feliciano chuckled, fixing the flower crown while looking at his reflection. After a few moments, his eyes stumbled all over the place like he was still trying to comprehend this wasn't a scary place anymore, but instead a beautiful meadow. "This place is so weird, but it isn't scary anymore. Is it a dream? It feels like one, but a nice one instead."

A dream... Yes. The one he shared with him.

He knew it was the path to Feliciano. This was their first meeting all those years ago, when he found him.

At first, Ludwig thought they were just that; dreams. Strange ones that eased his pain, since he could meet someone with brown hair and a bright smile. A fragment of his imagination born from his unbearable loneliness, someone he couldn't talk to but accompanied him nonetheless. When Feliciano reached the lake in the real world, however, it took him little time to realize it was the person that visited him during those nights where the line between reality and dream was so blurry he couldn't even tell if he was sleeping or not. And that song... A traditional song from his kingdom, his mother would sometimes hum it in the royal gardens Ludwig hid in whenever he wanted to feel closer to her, but feeling too intimidated to ask for her affection directly. A romantic song for naive lovers in a kingdom where the commoners had much more love to give than the royal family itself.

If that stranger knew that melody, then surely he had to be an illusion Ludwig created. Otherwise, how would he hum it? Somehow, the more Ludwig tried to think about it, the more it felt like a fog was clouding his mind as if it was preventing him from remembering something important. He heard the same demonic chuckle ring in his head; the fiend was clearing that fog like he promised to.

Suddenly, everything shifted again. Now they weren't children; Feliciano had grown into a teenager with fine clothes, a white silk shirt and navy blue shorts. They weren't the blue Ludwig was accustomed for, it was lighter, more like a summer sky. The baby fat abandoned Feliciano's cheeks and his beautiful features became more prominent, but they didn't have any sharpness to them. Instead, he looked soft and gentle, but he seemed strangely sad that evening in that lake. Sitting on the grass, Feliciano hugged his naked knees and sighed.

"I feel so lonely at home. Lovino is busy studying to inherit the throne and he doesn't play with me anymore, he says I have to grow up and take my responsibilities seriously, but... What responsibilities would be left to someone like me? I'm not smart or brave, I have nothing to offer. I bet the kingdom would be happier if I was more like you." That surprised Ludwig who pointed at himself like asking if he really meant it, something that made Feliciano giggle. "Of course I mean it! You are serious but kind at the same time, I know you would be capable of making tough decisions. Whenever I get asked a complicated question, I freeze and just blurt whatever comes to mind..., b-but I can't help it! The thought of so many lives that could be at risk if I were to make the wrong choice... It's too scary. Heh, I'm kinda glad I'm the younger sibling, if I were the crown prince everything would fall apart. When I do something, I'm just like... Just feel it and whatever happens, happens! But that's not what a prince should say, right?"

Ah... He could understand that. Having that many lives in your hands was terrifying, especially at such a young age.

"You look strong and brave, like a knight from a fairytale."

Ludwig stared back at Feliciano with a frown. No, he wasn't. He was a coward. Feliciano just didn't know it because Ludwig couldn't speak, but even if he could... He didn't know if he would be able to say it out loud.

"Do you ever get scared?" Feliciano asked, teary eyes reminding Ludwig of a melting sunset.

Ludwig nodded faintly.

“...! You do?”

Yes. Always. Even now, he was terrified. If this was really his mind, then it meant this wasn’t the Feliciano from the real world. It was just a memory. He couldn’t escape this place, and who knows what was happening while he was mingling with these echoes from the past? Maybe it was dawn already. Maybe Feliciano... Couldn’t be saved anymore. Maybe Ludwig would be left all alone again. He was always scared of others, of responsibilities and mistakes. He was *terrified*.

“Really...?” Feliciano paused for a moment and then weakly smiled, placing one of his hands on top of Ludwig’s. “Then I’ll stay here. If you are with someone, it isn’t that scary, right? I’ll stay by your side until you aren’t scared anymore.”

It was warm and for a moment he forgot this was a memory. Feliciano said those words many times during their encounters at the lake, but they were as powerful as when he first heard them. In this world or in the other, Ludwig was weak against him.

Feliciano stared at the lake with flushed cheeks and Ludwig stared back, similarly embarrassed like teenagers on their first date, but he didn’t stop looking at him. Whenever Ludwig looked at Feliciano, he would be reminded of that story he liked so much as a child, the one about the Fairy Prince. It just never clicked until he knew whose child he was... And how strange it was that he didn’t remember her either. The fiend whistled inside his mind and said “*you’re getting closer to the answer! Here, let me help.*”

Like mist, Feliciano’s figure disappeared with a snap and was replaced instead with a small one Ludwig knew belonged to a fairy, but it wasn’t anyone he recognized yet at the same time, he knew exactly who she was. Wearing a single primrose in her brown hair, she was flying on top of Ludwig who now had the body of a duck, swimming peacefully in the waters... Almost like he was ignoring her.

“I’ve always liked the human world so much! It’s just so fun, they make all these tiny things just to admire how pretty they are! Like... Like... Necklaces! They serve no real purpose but

because they are pretty, humans make them with intricate designs and gems and, oh, it's beautiful!" The fairy spoke and spoke, her wings fluttering like they belonged to a bee or a hummingbird. Ludwig could see in the distance a congregation of fairies staring at them, some of them looked disgusted and scared while others were more curious but were unable to gather the courage to approach them. Elizabeta was in the latter category. "That same human I told you about brought many necklaces and rings to show us and because I liked it so much I wanted to make one myself. I chose something called silver because it looked like the hair of that human and I used magic to help me craft the shape I wanted it to be. I wanted to make it look like, well, primroses! Since it's my thing, you know, primroses, Primrose fairy... Duh!"

She kept talking, accompanying him like she was trying to make him feel better, but Ludwig wasn't listening to her. At least, not the one she was speaking to.

"I used blue gemstones and the end product was soooo pretty! I gifted it to the human to show him my appreciation, he said it was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen and he wanted to show it to his little brother..." She paused and stared at him, who didn't return her gaze and instead treated her blabbering like white noise. Pressing her lips together in a pained expression, she tried to get him to look at her by flying in front of his face, blocking out the sunlight. "... Do you like jewelry, Ludwig?"

But no matter how much she tried, the Swan King wouldn't answer. However, he did appreciate her attempts and whenever Giselle would spend time with him, the meadow would have nice weather, so she knew her presence eased the human's mind. At least he wouldn't go insane with all the silence...

But it was strange. Ludwig didn't remember any of this yet he felt a strong sense of *déjà vu*. The demon laughed, but this time he didn't say anything and instead snapped his fingers again. The fake sun traveled at least five times through the sky above, signaling the passage of the days or months. Maybe even years.

"Ludwig, I want to see the human world." The fairy said with a determined look on her face. "I will leave this forest and see everything with my own eyes."

For the first time in years, he looked back at her.

“Will you be lonely?”

It was night so he was in his human form, which meant Giselle could see the surprise in Ludwig's face. The pale and bluish glow the fairy emitted was reflected in the Swan King's expression who couldn't find the proper words to even begin explaining how he felt, but they weren't needed. The dark clouds roaring on top of them was enough to communicate his exact thoughts. The following rain was obvious, but it didn't come alone. It was accompanied by anguish and black feathers.

“I'm... sorry.”

And then, one day she left never to return. The fairies gossiping amongst each other about it weren't exactly the quietest, so the news were carried by the wind to every inch of the woods. Did she really leave? How did she do it? What will become of her?

That day, a storm was invoked by a giant monster. The fairies had to run to the shelter inside the biggest tree while the lake started to overflow because of the rain. They had to do something, they had to calm the beast.

As always, the storm would eventually come to an end, although this time it was with a spell that locked the sweet memories that had become painful. It wasn't Giselle who placed it. It was a certain fairy of beige hair and chamomile flowers decorating it, she was the only one who knew about memory magic and to avoid more casualties, she erased all traces of the Primrose fairy from Ludwig's head.

If there was no Giselle to miss, then he wouldn't be grief-stricken, right? A conclusion befitting a creature who couldn't understand human emotions. Anya couldn't hide her hatred, however; she shouted out in fury, *“what else do you have to take away from us so you can be satisfied?”*

A monster should stay lonely, unloved and he should forget someone even tried to reach out. If that could spare the victims, then so be it.

*“How amusing, a total twist of the plot!”*

The demon clapped his hands, or at least it sounded like he was clapping since he was still incorporeal and invisible until he finally decided to appear once again in front of Ludwig, using the masculine form once again.

“How mean, she gave you hope just to leave you behind... But it’s not like you aren’t familiar with such a thing.” The fiend laughed, wearing the female voice that was as sweet and as motherly as possible just to make fun of the beast. “At least they spared you the pain of remembering, so you should be grateful! But to think the child of that fairy would cling to you... *Mon Dieu*, how small can the world be?”

Too small for his taste, but this newfound knowledge... It was strangely comforting, like a suspicion he’d had for so long finally resolved even if he didn’t know why he felt uneasy all this time. Not only these magic restraints he didn’t know he had on him were lifted, his heart was the lightest it had ever been since his childhood where this grudge that poisoned his entire being began.

“I hate magic.” He muttered, eyes piercing right through the demon who tilted his head in inquiry. “It took everything I cared for away from me. It made me into a monster, so to me it was a demonic force that could only do harm. That is what I thought, but...”

The fiend smirked, knowing exactly what the other man wanted to say. Someone with tact would have let it go, but since he wasn’t allowed to hurt others for his amusement, he had to entertain himself in other ways. Too bad they didn’t have much time left.

“Yes, yes, we know. Humans fear the unknown. You feared magic and with fear came hostility, so everything was put into motion like dominos falling on top of the other, something so very charming about you humans... But it’s even better when you people realize how foolish you were.” The demon snorted, raising a hand towards his mouth like he was telling a secret. “You were so foolish, it was a blast seeing you suffer, but that act is long done. Magic... It allowed you to meet that ‘pure soul’ you love so much, didn’t it? So quit pouting about these things and wake up already, will you? I’m getting bored.”

But it didn’t seem like that. Instead of being bored, the fiend’s smile was slightly melancholic. Uncanny, it didn’t fit him.

“The restrictive spell has been broken and you still have something left to do, don’t you? This ‘pure soul’ is still waiting for you over there.”

Why did he look so sad when pronouncing those words?

Ludwig didn’t have time to ask, since the darkness around him began to engulf his body like it was water, filling his lungs and blurring his vision. The figure of the demon had disappeared and his voice resonated in Ludwig’s head, almost like a goodbye.

*“You found him at last, so don’t be an idiot and don’t let him go. You’ll never forgive yourself if you do.”*

And then, he woke up, laying in the grass and his forehead filled with sweat. He could hear some birds lazily singing in the distance, a sign of the arrival of dawn, but the sky was still dark. They still had some time, he still had time left. He tried to stand up but it was so sudden his vision became blurry and he almost fell to the ground.

“Hey, easy there. It’s okay.” A thick British accent accompanied the strangely worried tone used to pronounce those strange words. When Ludwig turned around to see who it was, he was met face to face with an expression he never thought he would see on that sorcerer. Was that worry on his face? What was going on? “You woke up at last, huh. I thought you wouldn’t, I was starting to become anxious.”

Judging by the many small grass blades pulled out of the ground sitting on Arthur’s knees, it had to be true. He had been plucking grass this whole time despite cherishing the forest, how many hours was he asleep? No, that wasn’t important right now. Looking around him, he finally found Feliciano, still laying down on the grass and still sleeping. His body temperature was being cared for by the fairies themselves, most of them were relieved and somewhat scared when seeing Ludwig practically crawling towards them.

“Fe...” Ludwig tried to speak but only a pitiful groan abandoned his mouth. This alarmed him greatly and Ludwig guided one of his hands to his throat, trying to force himself to speak.

“Oh, you probably can't speak because you roared so damn loud when you were attacking me... Your human vocal cords are worn out, but it's okay, I can-”

But he couldn't finish his sentence because Anya had thrown a pebble towards Ludwig. It was small and it probably didn't hurt, but it was enough to make every single person stop in their tracks. Feliks was the first one to intervene, standing up to her and extending his wings to act as a barrier.

“You crazy chick! That was so unnecessary! What is wrong with you?”

“It's broken, isn't it?” She shouted out. Her expression was filled with fury, something none of the fairies ever saw on her. Unlike the frigid rage she usually wore, this was a tangible and painful rage directed to the Swan King himself, who only stared back at her with a strangely calm face. “You broke the spell! How did you do it? You were never supposed to break it...! I made sure of it, the condition was...!”

Tolys tried to tug her coat, but the red glow she was emanating was becoming too hot to actually touch her, so he ended up just trying to talk to her.

“H-hey, Anya, stop! Calm down! What if he gets angry again?”

“I don't care! It's all his fault, it's his fault we are stuck here! It's his fault Yao is gone, he burned him! He made Giselle leave! It's all his fault, he's a monster, what do you mean he has repented?!?”

“Repented?”

The Chamomile fairy pushed Tolys away and she lifted herself further from the ground, tiny tears threatening to fall from her eyes.

“You did something, didn't you? You probably got help from someone else. I sensed something nasty, something demonic... The demon broke the spell, didn't it? It's the only explanation! You brought a demon here to free yourself! How else would a fiend find it way here?”

The nervousness and chaos that came after that were only normal. Some of the fairies, the more sensitive to magic, already had their suspicions, but because the fiend was well hidden in the ring, none of them could pinpoint where it exactly came from. It was only when the devil showed himself that they finally knew there was a monster in their home. Another one.

Ludwig, on one hand, was still really disoriented from waking up; he couldn't quite understand what she was talking about, but he had a hunch. Still, it wasn't like he appreciated being accused of something. How could he even bring a devil here? That was impossible even if he tried to. This was getting ridiculous. Using his arms to hold Feliciano's sleeping body, he growled in a threat to warn Anya, the beastly nature still not abandoning his body. If one of those annoying pebbles managed to hit Feliciano, who knows what would happen with the feathery monster. With a hoarse and slow voice, he managed to pronounce more than a sound.

“I do not know what you are talking about, but save it for later. I have to...”

“Shut up! It was you! You didn't repent, you just used demonic powers to pretend you did! You could've fooled the rest... You could've fooled Giselle, but you can't fool me! You are a monster, you brought a devil here!”

“That isn't true.”

Arthur's voice was stern and calm, almost like he was scolding Anya, but his expression was gentle. Getting closer to them, he extended a hand towards the fairy, almost like offering her to rest there... But it was the hand that wore the ring. From its red gem, smoke started pouring out and the air became heavy and polluted. It was for mere moments, but Anya had trouble breathing once the foul energy clouded her eyes until it was gone.

No, it wasn't gone. It just took another form. A man with ram horns sitting on top of his light brown head, floating around Arthur with an amused and flirty smile. The demon did not expect Arthur to come clean this fast, but he wasn't complaining either. Seeing firsthand how baffled and surprised the annoying fairies were was like a healing potion to his very wounded and delicate heart... Right.

“I brought him here, the one who made a pact with him is me.” Arthur closed his eyes for a second, already knowing what the fairies would think. “I didn't do it to harm you or the forest. At first I didn't even want to, but... It got complicated.”

Too complicated to dwell too deeply on it when time's sand was slowly falling prey to gravity, sitting on the lower part of the hourglass. They didn't have much time left.

"He won't harm you. I have his name, he can't do anything harmful, he just..." He sighed, waving his hand in an attempt to shoo the fiend away, but he just used Arthur's head as a resting point for his arms. "He protected me from the attack and then... I don't know, but he won't harm anything."

Anya's glow was no longer red. In fact, it had become faint and almost disappeared, but she remained steady in the air. Like an open book, her thoughts were written all over her pale face while her sisters whispered amongst themselves. The fiend chuckled to himself as he wrapped his body around Arthur, but it still wasn't tangible so he passed through him.

"I just helped out as I promised to do. I gave my master the power to protect his home and his family, that's all. I won't hurt any of you silly little beings, even if I wanted to. See these runes right here in my beautiful neck? They are proof of our contract."

"... That's... That's impossible." Anya whispered.

The fairies were still terrified, at least most of them. Even Roderich had to stand on the floor because his wings had no strength to keep him in the air. Elizabeta helped him stand and, despite being the bravest of all she was trembling as well, the presence of a demon proving to be far too frightening to beings who were light in physical form, but...

"I believe you." The Tulip fairy said, going against what her most innate instincts told her to.  
"I believe you, Arthur."

Anya pressed her hand against her chest, shaking in what could be considered anger by some and fear by others.

"I also believe Arthur." Roderich added, even if he was in the worst of shapes. "It would be foolish to doubt the one we raised, we should have to doubt ourselves... Then again, some doubt is what it takes to change your perspective, Anya. It just takes the slightest bit of bravery to do so, don't you agree, Ludwig?"

Like a director who controlled the orchestra, Roderich made all eyes fall on Ludwig who could not look at the Edelweiss fairy in the eyes and instead kept his gaze fixated on the sleeping bard. Changing perspectives... It was so scary, but at last he could do it. He didn't do it alone, however. He had to be pushed by someone, and that someone was...

“Feliciano.” He mumbled with his deep and damaged voice.

Even humans were unable to keep that harmony intact amongst themselves, so how could they live in harmony with fairies? That was the conclusion he came with after spending fifty years in solitude. Magic was harmful and dangerous, fairies and sorcerers were vicious beings, humans had no love or beauty in them. That was how things were, they wouldn't be able to change. And yet...

The son of a fairy and a human, blessed by magic itself. A bard who despite everything searched for beauty and offered love to the world. Feliciano had come and changed everything for him, made him see that stubbornness was what kept him from bonding with the ones who would be able to love him the most. Caressing the slightly warmer cheek of the brunet, Ludwig couldn't help but smile faintly. So repenting wasn't enough, he had to change his whole worldview and, finally, he could do it thanks to a bard who he called without realizing, huh... Somehow, everything seemed to be connected. Like the heavens themselves set up this stage. Honestly, he couldn't complain anymore. If they wanted him to meet his man and fall in love with him, then they sure succeeded and he wasn't complaining.

Anya trembled and whispered something before disappearing into the woods with a fast flight, unable to keep watching. Tolys held onto Feliks, feeling his stomach turn in both stress and worry. The presence of the devil certainly did not help, but since it was shackled to Arthur, he supposed it was safe.

“Anya...”

“Well, she was really attached to her. We should give her time, Tolys. We have, like, plenty of it.” The Poppy fairy chuckled softly, attempting to console his friend who in turn just sighed with a saddened smile.

“I...” Chiara muttered, holding Isabel's hand while in the air. “We'll go check on her anyways.”

Because it was uncomfortable to be near a demon and at least Chiara felt genuinely worried. Nodding to each other, they followed the Chamomile fairy into the woods, Isabel giving the two humans one last glance before sighing and saying “*ay, these humans...*”

Feliks, now leaning towards the Rue fairy, whispered:

“And we should give those two some space, too!”

They were getting really lovey-dovey, something that made Ludwig cough in embarrassment.

“Indeed.” Roderich said, but he was interrupted by the demon who by the way had still not disappeared into his genie lamp. Tulip and Edelweiss did not hide their contempt once they heard what he had to say.

“Indeed! Leave, leave, fairies, since you are not as relevant as I am to this marvelous story. I still have one last dialogue to give.” Francis laughed out loud and with a gesture, the primrose necklace flew straight from Arthur’s hand towards the grass in front of the couple. “Before I go, be sure to tell your boyfriend to purify this thing. After inspecting it, I realized there was a really amusing message to who I assume is Feliciano’s dear brother.”

Arthur couldn’t react in time to avoid being robbed of the necklace and could only curse and insult the annoying fiend who, in spite of being still subservient, was actually pushing his master aside to give the couple a bit more privacy.

“Hey! I didn’t give you permission to do that, that necklace is...!”

“Not yours, *mon cher*. Don’t humans have a system where their offspring inherit what their parents had?”

“...! Well, yeah, but... But how will they be able to purify it?”

“Mhm, fair point, but we can expect at least something from a soon-to-be sorcerer, don’t you think?”

“Soon-to-be?”

“Oh, come on, I know you know. Once the spells are broken, the fairy prince will...”

“... Be able to use the innate magic he inherited?”

“*Très bien*, my dear master, *très bien!*”

“Oh, shut up, you are so annoying...”

“I’m sorry to interrupt, Arthur, but I believe you still owe Eliza an apology.”

“R-roderich...! Elizabeta...”

“Fufu, yes. I believe he owes me an apology too.”

As they walked away, the four voices became less important to Ludwig who had taken the necklace in between his fingers, staring at it for a moment. He recognized it, he now knew who it belonged to. Once upon a time, he thought this necklace was the most beautiful thing in the world, but now that it was compared directly to Feliciano, the necklace did not even glow in the slightest.

He could hear the birds singing to each other to welcome the sun and he somehow knew what he had to do. The feathers covering his body were becoming whiter as the seconds passed and they fell slowly, one of them falling on top of Feliciano’s nose. Gently and softly, he brushed it off and his now human hand caressed his cheeks, closing his eyes and feeling the warmth engulf him.

He always knew from the moment he saw him the first time. He leaned towards him, feeling his heart thump against his ears. Yet somehow, doubt was starting to manifest as well. It never really left anyone, much less someone like Ludwig. Time was ticking away, but... What if Ludwig wasn’t the one? What if Feliciano wasn’t the one? What if the kiss did not work? Would Feliciano never wake up again? He couldn’t accept that. If he could make sure Feliciano woke up and smiled again... He wouldn’t mind remaining a monster, afraid of warmth and light.

“All these years... I was so scared of the sun, but you...”

The sun personified came down and embraced him with an affection he hadn’t known until now, showing him daylight was not scary because Ludwig would not be alone anymore. It was only right he helped him as well, it was... What he longed to do when he realized how he really felt. If he could only see that smile again... The world would be beautiful at last.

These hands of his were once stained with blood and were only suitable for wielding swords, yet now they could play musical instruments and caress the lover of his dreams.

“I love you. Please, please wake up.” He whispered, lips brushing against each other until they joined in a tender kiss. He didn't know how many minutes passed, he just knew this was the kiss that they longed for since their souls found each other, so many years ago.

For a moment, doubt grew again even with the gentle moistness of Feliciano's lips, but it was cleared once he felt the arms of his bard surround his neck, the kiss being reciprocated. Opening his eyes in surprise, he separated for a brief moment.

“Feliciano...?”

“Ludwig.” He pronounced his name so sweetly, like it was the verse of a love song. His amber eyes were glassy and filled to the brim with tears, but his expression and smile were so gorgeous he could've been confused with the sun itself. Ah, that voice he missed so much... “Ludwig, I knew you would come and save me, I already thought so but I never told you, you are more like a knight than a king. A knight in shining armor.”

A sob was choked out, being held off by another kiss and then another. Ludwig wrapped his arms around the smaller frame in a tight hug once the lack of air made it impossible to keep kissing, but Feliciano's still dazed state made him react slowly, returning the hug with a smile.

“Hehe, are you crying, Ludwig? I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get cursed too... But it wasn't really a curse, now that I think about it... Whoops, I'm talking too much, aren't I? Sorry. Don't cry, Ludwig.”

“Don't stop.”

“Huh?”

“Don't stop talking. Don't stop singing. I...”

The sun was up, no longer hidden by the horizon, but Ludwig was still a man. His golden hair reflected the light and the blue eyes made the sky look gray in comparison. He was a

human during the night and during the day.

Feliciano blinked once and then twice and he could hear Ludwig's heart beat at the same crazy rhythm as his own heart. His face finally flushed with color, waking up from the dream with a true love's kiss. His love, his dear knight.

“I love you, Ludwig. I love you.”

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“Look! I'm outside the forest!”

“Hey, be careful, that looks, like, a bit dangerous.”

“Aw, come on, Feliks! We are free!”

“... Well, you are right! We are totes free!”

“Hey, you two! What if a human sees us!”

“Nah, they are too busy throwing flowers at those three.”

“Indeed, I doubt those fools would ever notice such small beings like us...”

“True.”

The fairies weren't held back by the spell anymore. Just in the entrance of the woods, they were rejoicing outside of their realm, enjoying the fact they could enter and leave as they pleased.

Elizabeta sat on a branch, legs crossed on top of another as she watched how Feliks and Tolys were having fun playing with each other, but...

“You seem uneasy.”

Roderich sat beside her, fixing his small glasses with a quick gesture.

“I can't hide anything from you, can I?” She said, giggling, but she ended up sighing heavily. “I just... We are free to roam around the world now. I know some fairies will take this chance to explore what's beyond the forest, and that...”

Roderich nodded faintly, eyes falling onto the figures of the Poppy and Rue fairies.

“That worries you because some might end up like Giselle.”

“Jeez, Roderich, you have no tact. Going straight for the jugular.”

“... My apologies, I did not mean...”

“Heh, it's okay. That's the way you are, and Giselle... She was also the way she was.” Elizabeta smiled bittersweetly, placing a hand on her cheek with the fondness a human mother would have. “For me, I'll stay here. This is my home and I will protect it, but I can't stop them if they decide they want to see the outside, so I can just hope the human world is gentle to them.”

A hopeful thought that both of them knew wasn't realistic, but there was nothing to be done about that. Nothing at all.

Roderich stood up and brushed the dirt off his pants with an elegant gesture, wings fluttering slightly as he moved.

“You should wish they have fun instead of getting treated gently, Eliza.” He said, extending his right hand towards her. “We need to have fun in dire conditions, don't we?”

Elizabeta blinked in confusion, taking a moment to recognize her own words spoken with the voice of the fairy she shared her life with.

“... Yeah, you’re right. Us fairies can’t spend too much time frowning.” She said, her smile becoming brighter once she accepted Roderich’s hand, using it to stand up next to him while her uneven wings were spread wide.

“Hey, Tolys, what’s that ugly thing?”

“I think it is called a coin... It’s nothing important, probably.”

“Mhm, if Tolys says so then it must be true! Blegh, I won’t touch it!”

While the fairies played around, the sorcerer, the bard and the king were back at the village. The sun was gentle and had it not been for the overwhelming choir of voices belonging to many people, it would almost seem like a normal morning for Schwanenberg.

Wearing the commoner clothes Feliciano had fetched him, Ludwig stood up way too much. The moment they finally reached the village after breaking the spell and chatting with the sorcerer (though it was Feliciano the one who spoke for the three of them), the villagers practically swarmed towards them in both worry and surprise. “Oh, you have returned safe and sound, that must mean you have slayed the beast!” was the general consensus on what happened. Of course, they couldn’t really say what actually happened with the beast; Arthur decided that he would like to keep the lake as a whole a secret, so they didn’t clear things up and just answered questions as vaguely as they could. Magic would remain something mystical and mysterious, but he still had to heal the forest and with no spell to protect it, he had to get creative to avoid any incidents. Plus, he still had to inspect the storybook, so he couldn’t leave yet... It was just that. It wasn’t like he wanted to stay. Not at all.

In short, Feliciano and Ludwig were held prisoner by the beast and Arthur saved them, but the details were fuzzy in purpose so they could make up whatever they wanted the story to be. The only thing that was kept clear was that the monster was not completely dead, just asleep. Thus, Arthur would stay behind to make sure no one awoke it. That was a good story to keep them away from the lake.

At first the villagers were curious about the handsome new man but once Feliciano noticed this was troubling Ludwig, he did his best to divert all the attention towards himself. And as an experienced performer, he succeeded.

“I was asleep because of a spell, I didn’t know what was happening... But then, the sorcerer came! With a movement so wide and so elegant he conjured two swords made of pure light,

one in each hand!” He pronounced each word theatrically, the attention of everyone on him, including Arthur who, by the way, did not approve of this retelling of events... But he couldn’t complain, this was tickling his ego a bit and he couldn’t help but cross his arms with a satisfied smile as he looked away to concentrate on his conversation with Rainer, a bit farther from the others. “He defended with such gallantry I confused him with a knight, not a herbalist!”

That was a bit of an exaggeration.

“But what about him?” Someone asked with a childish voice. The kid had pointed to Ludwig who had a serious and even scary expression. “Was he under a spell too?”

Arthur coughed slightly once he heard that question, but he decided to let the one who had experience dealing with an audience deal with it. Ludwig stuttered for a brief moment, trying to come up with something on the spot but he couldn’t even invent a white lie to save his life. Instead, Feliciano was quicker and hugged Ludwig’s strong arm, making him flinch and frown in surprise.

“Indeed! He has been under a terrible spell for so long...” He started, making Ludwig tense up but once Feliciano gave him a smile, the blond could feel himself relax. “But he still found the way to save me, isn’t he amazing? He instantly knew how to break the spell, as if we knew each other for a long time.”

With an “ooohh” from the villagers who were paying attention to the story, Ludwig could feel himself blushing faintly before nodding his head.

“I... I knew the beast for a long time. I am glad it is finally asleep, now it won’t hurt anyone.” He spoke to someone else besides fairies, sorcerers and bards for the first time and after a moment, he looked back at the villagers and he found himself feeling at ease in their presence. Not as a king or as a monster, but as a normal man. “Feliciano... He saved me. Not the other way around. I hope that is clear now.”

Feliciano pressed his lips in a clear pout.

“I’m telling the story here, Ludwig...!”

“That was just my input.”

“Mhm, if you say so.” The brunet chuckled and hugged the other’s arm even more closely, causing the oldest adults to look away in shared embarrassment as the crowd began to separate. Youth these days... “But the real hero here was Arthur, don’t you think? He came like... *Bam*, and then, *swish!*”

Changing his way of telling the story for a more childish way, it was as if he either forgot his literary formation or as if he stopped caring about that elegant yet artificial way of reciting. A bit more freely and joyful, just the way he acted in the dream meadow they met in. This romantic display of closeness was interrupted however by none other than Jürgen who had been tasked with bringing Feliciano’s belongings. With a slightly tired and slightly annoyed smile, the young man left the backpack on the floor while Edith carried the *ghironda*. It seemed he was the one who kept watch the most at night since the bags under his eyes were dark and noticeable.

“Here they are! Now, if you allow me, I shall go to bed now... Ahh, damn!”

Because he yawned so wide a fly almost entered his mouth and he shooed it away with his hand.

“For God’s sake, Jürgen, wash your mouth. What will they think if you see them off while cursing?” Edith said with a frown that disappeared once she extended the musical instrument to its owner. “Here you go, Feliciano. Thank you for everything, it was nice having you here, too, uhm... Ludwig? I’m sorry, I couldn’t hear your name.”

“Ah, yes, thank you, miss Edith! Yes, it’s Ludwig, he’s a bit shy.”

“...”

“Hehe, see?”

“Yes, I can tell.” She giggled to herself, finding him strangely similar to a big bear man she herself adored. “I can also tell you somehow brought a refreshing wind of change to this little village and I can’t thank you enough for it. Be sure to write, alright? Maybe the powerful sorcerer can use his magic to make sure our letters arrive in time... Since he’ll stay, sir Arthur can also be a huge help around here with his magic, who knows? Maybe we can make some

machinery to lessen the burden of the elders... I should ask him now that Rainer has him contained... Ah, sorry, I was mumbling to myself!"

Feliciano shook his head and gave her a genuine smile, looking around him for a moment. The rustic and humble village would soon become something else, he could already see it.

"Don't apologize! I bet Arthur will be delighted to help you guys out! He was so nervous thinking how he could repay you guys for allowing him to stay, so this will be a win-win for both parties. Oh, but make sure he thinks he came up with it, he has a bit of an ego."

"Oh, that's perfect! Thank you! And don't worry, I know how to deal with that kind of guys." With a bright smile, she lifted the right side of her dress in an elegant bow and set off towards Rainer and Arthur who seemed to be discussing something in secret.

And now, it was the turn of a certain small lady. The girl had separated from the others so she could speak directly to the couple.

"Are you really leaving, fairy prince?" Gisela cried out, the whites of her eyes reddened with tears. "Y-you have to come back someday, okay? You have to bring gifts too! Or, or maybe I can go visit you when I grow older!"

Hugging his knees with a strength that did not combine with her crying face, the little girl clearly did not like goodbyes. With her mother behind her, she was practically drenching Feliciano's trousers with tears while Hildegard seemed to be on the verge of tears as well but remaining as calm as she could. After many apologies, both given and received, the woman had to say goodbye too but it seemed the apple didn't fall far from the tree as she had to lean onto Liselotte to keep herself steady, the other woman being as fierce as ever. She still did not like foreigners, but she was being quiet about it, at least.

"You have to ask your mother for permission first, *signorina* Gisela." Feliciano said, patting her golden head. "My homeland is really far away, you wouldn't want to leave her all alone, right?"

"...! Of... Of course not..."

"Who says she'll go alone?" Hildegard intervened, arms crossed with a slightly rejuvenated smile, almost child-like. "I've always wanted to visit a southern kingdom, maybe I can use my little daughter as an excuse."

That made Gisela frown for a moment before sighing as if she had no choice, but she couldn't conceal her smile in time to pretend she didn't like the idea. Hildegard began to speak to Liselotte, walking away and inviting her to a girls only journey and after a moment, Gisela's emerald eyes fixated on Ludwig. Waiting for the right moment when her mother was distracted, she tiptoed towards him and asked out loud:

“Are you the beast, mister Ludwig?”

Choking on air, the two men had to take a moment to compose themselves, Ludwig especially who stuttered:

“How did you...?”

“It's the eyes!” She said, smiling brightly. “*Mutti* always says that to know a person's true heart, you have to look at their eyes, and mister Ludwig's are the same as the beast, especially because they have no malice in them. I could tell instantly.”

Of course she could, huh... Nothing ever escaped her sharp eyes.

“Well... Arthur did say you have an innate talent for magic, so maybe that's a factor.”

“Wait, she has?”

“Hehe! It's okay, it will be a secret... And this time, I will keep it a secret!”

“This time?”

“Oh, it's... I'll tell you later, Ludwig.” Feliciano said, laughing a bit nervously.

“What are you laughing at, Feliciano?” Hildegard asked with a raised eyebrow after noticing they were whispering amongst themselves. However, she wasn't looking at the bard. Oh, no, her eyes were fixated on the very tall, very blond and very silent man right next to him. “Look at you, acting all innocent! You found yourself a handsome man and now that you saw everything here you'll take him to your castle and marry him, won't you?!”

Ludwig's face hardened in what someone would think was anger when in reality it was more like embarrassment and surprise.

"Ohh, will you two get married? Can I and *mutti* come to the wedding? Pretty pleaseee!"

"Yes, pretty please, Feliciano. Listen to my daughter, will you?"

"Ah, we... Uhm, hehe, look behind you!"

"I won't fall for that..."

"... Run, Ludwig!"

"R-run?!"

Taking the backpack, Feliciano pulled Ludwig's hand as they sprinted away from the three women, laughing like children. With a loud "hey!" and subsequent laughter, Ludwig could already tell human interaction was both exhausting and exhilarating, but he couldn't tell if he liked it or not. For now, he would follow Feliciano and, perhaps, they could talk about... Those "I love yous" and kisses that they had yet to discuss, maybe they could...

"Hey, I still have unfinished business with you two. Or more specifically, Feliciano."

Of course they were interrupted, why wouldn't they.

Arthur had finished his business talk and intercepted the running lovers (future lovers?) with a hand on his hip and the other pointing at them. The ring on his finger was glowing like the being inside it was cackling to himself.

"Unfinished business?" Ludwig asked with a frown, it was almost terrifying, but once Feliciano subconsciously wrapped himself around Ludwig in an attempt to protect him. This interaction that counted as a hug in Ludwig's head made him lose interest in whatever Arthur had to say and instead, he remained stiff trying to calm his inner thoughts and beating heart.

"U-unfishined business?" Feliciano muttered. "I thought you wouldn't...!"

“Of course I won’t kill anyone, bloody hell! That bastard is a normal human now, I don’t kill humans. What do I look like? A demon?”

“Uhm, well, I mean, kinda...”

“And I kinda want to be one now.” Arthur sighed and scratched his head. Instead of being angry or offended, he seemed nervous. “Look, the spell is lifted. There is no monster anymore, I will cleanse the lake and all that stuff and you two will leave, so I have no reason to fight anymore, but... The spell is lifted, right?”

Feliciano tilted his head, practically glued to Ludwig who had now tamed his nervous heart and was staring straight into Arthur while he sunk his hand into his pocket, searching for something.

“Uhm, yes? You already said that...”

“The spell is lifted! There are no magic circles restricting you anymore.”

“... Yes?”

“Oh, bloody hell, you really are clueless... I will just show you, do you have...?”

“Giselle’s necklace?” Ludwig asked out loud, surprising both sorcerer and bard. He raised his hand and held the necklace between his fingers, showing the red gemstones glow.

“Is that...?”

“Perfect! Now, give it to me.”

“Will you ‘purify’ it like the demon said?”

“Wait, what? That necklace is...?”

“I won’t, Feliciano will.”

“Wait!” Feliciano finally let go of Ludwig and stood between the two blonds. “Can you guys explain to me what is going on? I’m confused!”

And a bit afflicted too. Giselle’s necklace? Then it meant it belonged to his mother, and that...

“Ah, sorry. I should’ve explained from the start.”

“... I apologize, this completely slipped my mind. It was not my intention to keep this from you, Feliciano.” Ludwig muttered, now in slight distress once he realized he had caused Feliciano grief.

“No, it’s okay, I just... Tell me everything from the start, alright? And in turns! Don’t speak over each other. Don’t spare a single detail!”

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He shouldn’t have said that.

Not when one was a total magic nerd and the other was developing a similar interest and curiosity in the technicalities of magic itself.

They had moved into the forest, more specifically the lake, to avoid being seen by others. Sitting on the grass, the three men encircled the necklace that was now laying on the ground and this was somehow like they were going to do a ritual of some sorts. Wait, they probably would! Right, Feliciano did not understand a thing from their explanations, all he got was that he could wield magic and had to purify the necklace.

“Well, I have a contract with a demon and my own magic is very low, so the process of purifying a necklace would take me months, let alone a whole forest, but if my theory is correct, then Feliciano could save me a lot of work!”

“I suppose you would not be able to ask for your patron’s assistance in this matter, since demons are known to be unholy and dark beings. Borrowing his power to purify something would be akin to using polluted water to wash white clothes.”

“Exactly! Hey, for a beast you sure know your stuff, huh!”

“I told you, I am no longer a beast, and before that, I was a king.”

“Uh-huh, I don’t really care about those things. Human hierarchy means nothing to fairies.”

“Mn... Ah, speaking of fairies... You said they were made of light and magic, correct?”

“Yeah, why?”

“And purifying magic... You said it is light.”

“...! Oh, I get where you’re going! The answer is yes, fairies are the best at purifying magic, so the offspring of one has a better shot at it than me. Plus, my patron said there is a hidden message for Feliciano’s brother here, from their mother, and since it was my patron who said it, it’s true because he can’t lie to me. The perks of having a contract with an all-knowing being!”

“Fascinating. A message?”

“Right? And yeah, a message. Probably something about motherly love or something, who knows.”

Sorcerer and Swan King were now bonding over their interests and Feliciano would be happy if he wasn’t trying to follow the conversation and failing at it; their voices were becoming background noise and he couldn’t help it. He didn’t have that type of smart brain and he couldn’t understand no matter how much he tried to or how much Arthur broke down his explanation in an attempt to make it simpler.

But of course, he couldn’t really say that, not when he was the one who was supposed to do the purifying. So he did his best to follow, he really did...! But he got distracted. He could see some of the fairies in the distance giggling and waving at him, almost like they wanted to distract him. And they succeeded! When Arthur called out Feliciano’s name, the face he made made it clear he held no thoughts in his head.

“Feliciano? Hey, are you listening?”

“... I’ll do my best! What should I do?” But he couldn’t really say any of those words with the enthusiasm he wanted. Sensing Arthur’s judging gaze, the brunet lowered his head and laughed awkwardly. “Magic sure sounds complicated... I, I’m not sure if I can do anything besides singing but I’ll try, just, uh, don’t expect much!”

Arthur was about to say something but Ludwig was quicker. Placing a hand on the bard’s back, his serious yet stern expression was more encouraging than any fake words of praise Feliciano heard during all his life, but what really made his heart thump in his ears was the following expression he so often used in his childhood:

“Just feel it and whatever happens, happens.”

For a moment, he felt as if he returned to those comfortable and soothing dreams he wanted to live in. Even some days ago, he still wanted to never wake up once he encountered himself there, but now... He didn't need them because his lover was beside him in the real world, looking out for him. Yes, he wasn't alone anymore, he never was.

"I'm still here, you know... Ah, whatever." Arthur groaned, feeling out of place between those two, but he couldn't leave yet until he saw with his own eyes what Giselle's son could do. "I suppose giving you instructions won't work, so... Uh, just hold the necklace and try to focus on what you want to do. Chant 'purify' in your head or something, I don't know."

With the sound of water accompanying them, Feliciano nodded and extended a hand to take the necklace. Somehow, it felt uncomfortably hot in his fingertips. It didn't hurt, but this uneasiness was more instinctual than anything. Was it something about his fey heritage? He didn't know, but he did feel like he had to clean it somehow. Even now, the forest surrounding them felt that same way to him and that hadn't happened before, almost like his eyes had been opened to something he was ignorant of.

Now, he had to close them again to focus on it.

He had to concentrate on what he wanted, feel his 'wish'.

This land was the place his mother was born in, the woods she played in and the lake she loved dearly, but it had been polluted. That was unacceptable! He couldn't leave it like that, not when he could do something about it. He could feel something throbbing inside the necklace and all around them, but he couldn't quite reach it, he needed something... Someone.

Maybe, just maybe...

With his eyes still closed, he took Ludwig's hand without warning.

"...! F-Feliciano?"

He held the hand and the necklace close to his mouth and his lips brushed against the darkened silver. The warmth of Ludwig's skin was reassuring him.

Warmth, affection...

Purification.

With that, a golden light began to gently emanate from Feliciano. No, it wasn't golden, not like the one that Arthur managed, it was more like an amber color, the color of sunset and fire, and it slowly covered the three men. It felt almost like water and as the seconds passed, it grew stronger and stronger, blinding Ludwig and even Arthur. All of the sudden, the entire forest was submerged inside magical power.

The necklace began to float away from Feliciano's hand who had to hold onto it, eyes still closed shut, and Arthur could see how the dark spots and pollution were being cleaned away by the water. The red from the gemstones was dissolving like blood in a riverstream until a sharp blue had overtaken the jewels. Around them, Arthur could feel the change reach far into the woods, probably even the forest's outskirts and, just like it grew in strength, it began to dwindle until it finally disappeared again. It was a short-lived experience but it sure was something otherwordly; even if he was only half of fey, the difference between a mere warlock and an actual magical creature was overwhelming.

"...? Is it done?" Feliciano asked, opening one eye to peer into Ludwig's and Arthur's expression, but he already felt like something changed. The air felt cleaner and softer in his lungs, the water of the lake was clearer than before and the necklace... It was like new. "...! Ludwig, look! It looks so pretty! Woah, I didn't know a gem could be this blue. I think it's called... Prussian blue? It's so pretty..."

Still not letting go of Ludwig's hand, Feliciano leaned towards him to show him how much the necklace changed. Ludwig had to take a moment to compose himself after witnessing such raw magical power, but after realizing it wasn't the hostile and violent kind that he had known all this time, he felt like a huge burden was off his shoulders. And damn, holding his lover's hand was even more overwhelming than any display of magic. With his face flushed and a nervous expression that anyone could confuse for being angry, his blue eyes were fixated on Feliciano's smiling face.

“It is beautiful... Just as beautiful as when I saw it for the first time.”

“For the first time?” Feliciano asked and looked at Ludwig. “Did you see this necklace before?”

Flinching, Ludwig averted his eyes and after a second nodded.

“I should probably explain it from the start, but it’s a long story...”

“Oh, you know I love stories. I told you a lot of them, so now it’s your turn.”

“Well... That works for me.”

“Yay!” He celebrated and practically threw himself on top of Ludwig who could only shout “wait!”, the childish affection being, again, far more overwhelming than any magical spell.

Yeah, it worked...

But not for Arthur, who was the most surprised of all. Despite being happy about seeing his precious home healed again, his ego was severely bruised by this total novice sorcerer outdoing him instantly with some sort of cheat power. Standing up suddenly and having enough of the duo, he shouted even if he knew he wouldn’t be acknowledged by those two who were too busy being lovey-dovey:

“I didn’t expect that to work so well... That’s so unfair! How come you can do such a thing only because you have magical inheritance? I worked my ass off for more years than you’ve been alive! Come on! Ugghh!”

Worse of all? He could hear the fiend laugh his ass off from inside the ring and the image was so clear he could also hear a fictional table being hit when the laughter was too intense to bear.

“I’m done, I’m so done!” He grumbled, walking off somewhere to complain to someone who would hear him.

Meanwhile, Feliciano rested his chin on Ludwig's chest as he watched Arthur walk away like a child throwing a tantrum, playing with the necklace around his fingers. Because of his sudden hug, they were now both laying on top of the grass and, well, if Ludwig's white shirt became stained in green then they should get him another one, but it had to be of the puffy kind because it looked so good on him!

The peaceful and pure wind brushing the leaves and causing ripples on the lake's surface, the gentle sunlight raining on both of them and the presence of his lover... None of them said a thing, not when they could hear the distant laughter of the fairies or the singing of the birds and not when Feliciano accommodated himself to lay down next to Ludwig once he heard the furious heartbeat against his chest. He could see the red face and the stern expression that hid his embarrassment so poorly, at least in his eyes, and he couldn't help but giggle.

"What is so funny...?" Ludwig asked in a whisper like he was angry but Feliciano knew that wasn't the case.

"Nothing, it's just... This is just like one of our meetings in *that* place. It makes me wonder if I'm actually dreaming or not."

"... You are not dreaming. This is reality, I... We found each other."

"Hehe, yes, you're right."

"And, uhm... You did well. Purifying the necklace, I mean. Even I could tell you did it and I do not know anything about magic, since I am a normal human now."

"Mn, yes you are, you can go anywhere you want. You can meet people and see how much the world changed after fifty years. Where will you go now? Oh, you really like trying new foods, so maybe you can travel to a place with exotic cuisine, maybe to the East? I think there is a lot of good food there, but it's so far away..." Feliciano pressed his lips together, feeling a slight but sharp pain in his chest as he entangled the silver chain around his fingers. He couldn't look Ludwig in the eye anymore. "Ah... I feel a bit lonely now, I wonder why."

But he knew why and Ludwig also suspected the answer. And no, he didn't want him to feel that. He wouldn't allow it! Not anymore!

"Feliciano," he called out with a determination that began to fade as he kept talking. "I... I want... What I want is..."

Ahh, he was so bad with words. What he wanted to say was “I want to follow you anywhere you go, I want to be with you until the end, I want to stand by your side and never let go of your hand” but it was stuck on his throat both because of his shyness and lack of experience and because he didn’t know how to tie his feelings with actual words.

“I...”

“Yes, Ludwig?” Feliciano asked, amber gaze falling towards the reddened face of the man beside him.

The moment both their eyes collided, Ludwig could see the melting sunset he loved so dearly and now, without even needing to think about it, the words flowed:

“I want to see your homeland.”

“Huh? Y-you don’t want to stay here? This is your homeland, Ludwig, this is where you grew up, your kingdom, your...”

“My kingdom is long gone. I am not a king, now... I am just a free man. I can do what I want, and what I want is... Staying with you.”

Feliciano could feel his eyes itch, but the smile he received from Ludwig’s part was like healing.

“... Then... Then it’s decided. We’ll go to my home. The both of us.”

Ahh...

This was paradise.

Hearing his deep voice against the faraway waterfalls, being able to stare at his face and recall it even after peacefully closing his eyes and chuckling while hiding his face into the other’s chest.

“Wahh, don’t look at me, I bet I look dumb, I bet I’m making a dumb face.”

“Dumb? Of course not, why would you?”

“Because I... I... I love you too much, I’m just... I feel all giddy inside, it’s like butterflies are fluttering in my stomach, I, I love you... Does this mean we are lovers? I really want to be your lover, Ludwig. I love you too much.”

Ludwig had to close his eyes too, doing his best to control his heart and the amount of heat his face emanated. It felt like it was burning, but at the same time he could actually melt right there. Ah, this was too much! Too much, a critical attack! Once Feliciano shyly peeked through his embarrassment to check what Ludwig’s expression was like, he felt so happy realizing Ludwig was a nervous mess just like him. With this, he felt that mischievous and childish side of him kick in and, well, teasing him was something he really enjoyed.

“They did say we would get married, maybe we should?”

“F-Feliciano...”

“Heh, you are so red! Well, I do want to get married someday.”

“You do...?”

“Yep! With a pretty ring and a handsome husband of blue eyes and blonde hair... Wah, you became even redder!” He chuckled once again, the breeze bringing him the refreshing cold their cheeks needed so badly. “I wonder if my brother would allow it, though.”

...

Wait.

“Your brother, the king...?”

“Yes! When we return to my home, we should ask him to bless us!”

“W-wait, your brother, the king with a bad personality?”

“Hehe, yep, that one! I sure complained about him a lot during our dreams, right? He was so mean to me sometimes, but I miss him now that we’ve been apart for so long...”

But of course. Even during Ludwig's reign, there was one important step one should never skip when courting someone.

“Ah, how exciting! You'll finally meet my family!”

Yes, the most terrifying battle of all.

Yet Ludwig could feel his heart feel somehow at ease probably because he was sharing a wonderful moment with his now lover who he timidly embraced with one arm. Well, he could worry about that later, right?

... Right?

—♪—

“So,” Lovino started, clearly pissed off. “You’re telling me you got into an adventure where you befriended fairies, discovered our late mother was a fairy, fought alongside a sorcerer and saved this man from a curse that transformed him into a feathered beast every day?”

After a brief pause in which Feliciano looked at the nervous Ludwig beside him, he smiled brightly and nodded.

“Yes, exactly that!”

“Oh, *Dio mio...*”

They were currently inside Lovino’s office.

Feliciano's arrival was met with fanfare and celebratory chants from all over the kingdom and in similar fashion, the Unicornatian king had welcomed him in an official setting, offering him some words of wisdom and all that ceremonial stuff. However, the moment Feliciano started to blabber about some fantastical quest he went through, Lovino stopped him right in his tracks; they were in the throne room where many counselors, scholars and important nobles had gathered to participate in the welcoming of the youngest prince. Feliciano had noticed many of those nobles were young as well, with brilliant and honest faces unlike the traditional and conservative old people that used to pester the princes all the time. There were also many commoners in attendance, something that made Feliciano smile so wide he seemed almost drunk. Lovino always expressed his desire to allow commoners of outstanding abilities into the ranks of scholars and advisors despite the strong opposition from the noble faction, mostly from the corrupt and greedy ones, and it seemed he finally managed to clean it and give the kingdom a fresh new beginning. But he didn't have time to ask about it, since Lovino guided them straight to his office so he could scold them properly after leaving the luggage to the servants, who wouldn't stop whispering amongst themselves about the tall and handsome stranger that accompanied the prince.

During the whole journey, Lovino didn't bother to hide his murderous glances towards Ludwig who could only pretend he didn't offend the king of this country with his mere presence.

"Feliciano, what in the world are you doing? Where did this man come from? Tell me the truth."

"But I already told you! He's a king from a fallen kingdom, he spent fifty years trapped in a magical lake and..."

"For God's sake, Feliciano! I allowed you to travel so you could become more mature, not to feed your idiotic fantasies! What, did you hit your head on your way back and this scammer right here decided you were an easy target? Because you really are! Are you an idiot? There is no such thing as fairies and curses, this bastard right here lied to you!"

"Excuse me." Ludwig spoke, his stern and deep voice making both brothers flinch. As always, his strong accent and serious expression made him look angry, and maybe he was after witnessing the way Lovino was speaking. Was he really the king? He sure looked dignified when he welcomed them, but this seemed to be his real personality and it was not a nice sight. "I am not a scammer and Feliciano is not an idiot. What he said is true. It might seem difficult to believe, but I anticipated this and took the liberty to bring some evidence to back our claims..."

Lovino interrupted him, staring at Ludwig with a strangely intense gaze. Oh, he heard that unsolicited feedback on his personality and he did not like it.

“I didn’t give you permission to speak, did I?”

“You did not. However, you asked for the truth and I can provide proof.”

“You sure are cocky for a rando who appeared out of nowhere.”

“H-hey, you two!” Feliciano intervened, fearing blood would be shed if Lovino and Ludwig kept arguing. He was sure both of them were capable of it. “*Fratello*, I know it’s hard to believe, but... Everything I said is true. I even met our mother face to face, I spoke to her too.”

The mention of their mother made Lovino stop in his tracks, feeling like his soul had been evicted for a solid moment. Staring at the two individuals standing before him, Lovino searched for any proof of deceit, but all he heard was Feliciano’s honest affection. Stumbling over his words, Lovino looked at Ludwig instead but again, there was no dishonesty for him to hear.

“You... You know what will happen if you deceive me, right?”

“I can’t deceive you even if I wanted to. I know about your ability.”

“...?!”

“She told me everything.” Feliciano chuckled, being this the first time he ever saw his older brother so dumbfounded, and leaned towards Ludwig. “Why don’t we show him?”

The blonde man nodded and shoved his hand inside the bag, taking out something that had been wrapped carefully inside a girl’s handkerchief. Placing it on Lovino’s desk, he showed him the primrose necklace. The king, after recollecting himself, wasn’t impressed. It was pretty but that was all; he didn’t even touch it.

“What is this?”

“Mother’s necklace.”

“How do you know it was hers?”

“She told me.”

“... Right, because you spoke with her, a magical fairy, from beyond the grave.” Lovino rolled his eyes and didn’t bother to hide the fact the mention of their mother was dangerous territory for him. With a finger “And how exactly will you guys prove anything you said?”

Feliciano shook his head with a bright smile.

“We won’t.”

“What?”

“The necklace will.”

“Feliciano, I am losing my damn patience.”

“N-no, wait!” Feliciano pleaded. “Please. Just... Touch it.”

His younger brother stared at him with hopeful eyes and even if Lovino hated to admit it, they were enough to move him. What else could he do? Feliciano was his only family left, only a heartless monster would refuse to comply when that idiot was pleading this much! It had been only a few months but considering this was the first time in their whole lives they spent this much time apart, Lovino's worry and relief were stronger than his annoyance. He had yet to scold Feliciano for running away and fooling the knights he had sent to watch over him. If Lovino wasn't a good person (allegedly) he would've sent those two to the dungeons once they returned and announced they had lost track of the prince. He could only send more knights to search for him, but Feliciano had already left the kingdom and, well, damn. He could only pray for his safety until he returned. Lovino had a weak heart to everything that had to do with his younger brother. Not that he'd ever admit it out loud.

And so, with a very angry expression on his face, Lovino obliged. Extending a hand to pick up the necklace, he stared at it and inspected it more closely.

“I touched it but nothing's happening...”

“Oh, maybe I have to... Do something? Uh, do you remember what Arthur said, Ludwig? About how to activate the magic or something...”

“I do not think he even gave us any instructions, that damn... Ah, sorry.”

“Heh, it's okay.” Feliciano chuckled once he saw Ludwig feeling embarrassed due to his foul language but they couldn't keep whispering to themselves since Lovino was glaring at the

two of them. “W-wait! Let me... Ludwig, let me borrow your hand for a bit!”

Without waiting for an answer, Feliciano held the blonde man's hand and clutched it close to his chest while closing his eyes in an attempt to concentrate, much to the surprise of the other two. Ludwig's body tensed up and his face was painted in bright red, but his expression made him look so angry Lovino felt intimidated by it. However, this was his palace and he would not be afraid of some random macho man.

“Hey, I'm still here!” Lovino protested but then, a strange light started to flow from the hand of his younger brother, shooting directly at him as if it was amber-colored fire. He had no time to react and it blinded him as he clutched the necklace between his fingers, preparing to feel the burning pain of the flames, but that sensation never came. Instead, all he felt was warmth and like he was under the water.

Only a few seconds passed, probably, but for Lovino it felt way longer than that. A feminine voice he didn't recognize but felt familiar engulfed him, almost like a warm mantle. This was just like the inner voices he was so used to hearing, but it felt more like an echo from the past.

“My son, my dear, precious son, the strong older sibling...” She said in a whisper, the image of a mother cradling her two babies being as clear as day. Her tone held indescribable warmth and affection in it, but it also felt so weak and exhausted, like she was on the brink of falling asleep. Or worse. “Ah, my child... I'm so tired... I'm sorry, you'll have to take care of your little brother in my stead, I'm sorry... I was tricked, but you two were worth every single day of agony here, you are so very sweet, so tiny... May you be blessed with a keen hearing, so you won't be fooled like I was. You'll be a strong ruler, always telling right from wrong, truth from lies, love from hate... My Lovino.”

What followed that recorded moment were some mental images and sound of the wacky adventure Feliciano swore he experienced. They went so quickly but somehow they were clear, like he was the one who experienced it. The necklace that held so many memories was cool to the touch, allowing Lovino to return to the present once it revealed the truth. The lonely brown-haired fairy behind the water mirror was a scene he would not be able to forget.

“ *F-fratello...?* Are you alright, did it work?” Feliciano asked with a worried face, still not letting go of Ludwig's hand who seemed to be worried as well.

Lovino finally let out a breath, blinking once and then twice to keep the strange tears at bay.

“What did you do? That... Light.”

“Ah, it was... It was magic!”

“Magic?”

“Yeah! Because mother was a fairy, I can use magic! You probably can too, we should hire a sorcerer so he can teach you how!” Feliciano paused and then stared at Lovino, unconsciously leaning towards Ludwig in search of comfort. The blond, albeit shyly, patted his back and held his hand as unnoticeable as possible, which wasn't much. “Did you see her?”

Lovino massaged the bridge of his nose with his free hand and sighed.

“Yeah. I saw her. If you didn't drug me, that is.”

“...! I, I would never do that!” Feliciano mumbled, surprised and now fearing that it was a real concern, but Lovino's faint laughter interrupted his panic.

“Yeah, I know.” He simply said, shrugging. He didn't mention anything about those visions, he didn't ask questions or even gave snarky comments about it. Somehow, that magical experience seemed to have become somewhat normal for him.

Feliciano, despite his initial nervousness, felt relieved once Lovino seemed to accept everything so easily. He was a gullible and naive bard, after all; it was Ludwig's job to raise an eyebrow and wonder if this was really the end of it, but as an outsider, he didn't comment on it and just kept holding Feliciano's hand. This detail didn't go unnoticed by the king, who for a while now was feeling personally attacked by this blatant display of affection.

“So, this was Ludwig, right?”

“Ah, yes, I am...”

“I wasn't talking to you, I'm talking to my foolish brother.” Lovino rolled his eyes and Ludwig could already feel this would be a difficult chapter in his life. Turning towards Feliciano, the king frowned and asked: “What is your relationship with him?”

The answer was both obvious and complex at the same time, but not for Feliciano who blurted it without even thinking twice:

“He's my lover!”

This made both Lovino and Ludwig choke with air.

“Your lover?!” They both asked at the same time, but Lovino was furious while Ludwig was embarrassed.

“Yes...! I thought we formalized our relationship... Do you not want to?”

“Of course I want to!” Ludwig shouted, perhaps a bit too loudly. “I... I... Uh, *verdammt*, I... I will... I...!”

He was stumbling all over his words. Turning to look at a very freaked out Lovino, Ludwig held Feliciano's hands with such tenderness it gave the elder brother goosebumps. Were his eyes getting teary? That was just a light reflection, just that!

“I promised lady Giselle and now I will promise you, her son. I will cherish Feliciano for my whole life. Please, grant us your blessing!”

“Shut up! I won't bless anyone! Get out!”

“But... Your Highness!”

“Don't call me that! Feliciano, take your boyfriend outside right this instant or I will call the guards!”

“Hehe, you are a bit touched, right? ... Ah! You called him my boyfriend! Does that mean you recognize our love?”

“Of course not!”

“*Fratello*, are you... Crying?”

“I am not! Aaaghh!”

“What happened, Lovino?!”

“Hey! Who are you to barge in the king’s office? Feliciano, stand behind me!” Ludwig was the first to react to the sudden entrance of a fourth person. Putting himself between the door and the two brothers, he glared at the unknown man who was looking at the scene with a carefree smile. “State your purpose and identity right now!”

He was a tanned man with green eyes and brown hair and wore a happy expression even if he was currently being threatened by Ludwig.

“Ohh, guests! Hello, it’s nice to meet you all. I’m Antonio and I’m Lovino’s mate-”

“Jester!” Lovino interrupted, hitting the desk with both his hands. “He’s a jester I picked up. He’s damn hilarious.”

Feliciano peeked his head on Ludwig’s shoulders to examine the so-called jester, but since he wasn’t wearing anything even reminiscent of one, he couldn’t help but be suspicious and even if Lovino stated he was a fun jester, he was not in the mood for laughter. However, Antonio’s smile and cheerful demeanor was strangely infectious, so he waved his hand with a nervous smile.

“Hello! I’m Feliciano, Lovino’s younger brother, and this is Ludwig, my... L-lover! Uhm... You weren’t here when I left. When did you hire him, *fratello*? ”

“It’s a funny story, really!” Antonio laughed out loud. “It all started when I left my cave...”

But once again he was interrupted by Lovino who was now red from anger.

“Out! I need to think and if I have to see you two get lovey-dovey while I do I will actually break something.”

“Ehh? Do I have to leave too?”

That was Antonio sulking. After a brief pause, Lovino shook his head.

“No, not you, Antonio. You will make a mess if you do. Stay here, I will deal with you later.” He paused once again and stared at the couple and both Feliciano and Ludwig stared at him back, anxious. Lovino closed his eyes for a moment and finally sighed, unable to win against Feliciano’s pleading face. “I will arrange whatever you need, I just need some time to process everything. But rest assured, I would be a terrible brother if I didn’t support you and your... Ugh, lover... Whatever, don’t you have things to do? Things to show him? Be a proper host, Feliciano, show him around or something and leave me alone!”

That was the same thing their grandfather used to say whenever he had to welcome foreign envoys, save from that last part. His grandchildren would be very curious, obviously, so he had to make sure they wouldn’t mess up when they had to deal with it on their own. Now, Lovino gave him a smile that was so similar to *nonno*’s that Feliciano felt like tearing up. He was, actually! Ludwig placed a timid hand around his waist to comfort him while Feliciano nodded and smiled.

“I’ll do my best!” He answered just like they did when they were children and clutched Ludwig’s hand, leaving Lovino behind, wondering why this moment of brotherly affection had to be so short. He had just come back and he was leaving already... It was that bastard’s fault, damn it.

Nonetheless, seeing how the cowardly and melancholic Feliciano laughed out loud as he guided a nervous blonde man out of the room, Lovino couldn’t help but sigh.

“Damn it, when did he grow up so much?” Lovino groaned, covering his face with his hands but his smile had been noticed by Antonio, who extended a hand to pat Lovino’s head after seeing the lovebirds run down the hall like teenagers. Strangely enough, the king didn’t push him away and allowed him to do as he pleased.

“You are a good brother, Lovino.”

“Shut up, I don’t wanna hear it.”

“But it’s true! If my little brother showed up with a strange man and claimed that it was his lover, I would’ve chewed that bastard out after setting him on fire!”

“Do you have a little brother?”

“Nope.”

“Then stop coming up with better ways to deal with this than me.”

“Heh, yes, sir.”

The king scoffed and played with the primrose necklace with his fingers, the cold metal feeling nice to the touch.

“Ahh, everything happened so quickly... I will throw up...”

“Oh, should I bring a bucket?”

“Don’t, just... Escort me back to my room, it’s sickening to see those two flirt after getting hit with the revelation of my life... Don’t ask, I won’t tell you.”

“I wasn’t going to! But do you want to flirt with me instead?”

“I don’t!”

“Ow...”

“Don’t ‘ow’ me...”

Ah, he had a lot of work to do now, but he didn’t feel as overwhelmed as he always did. The sweet whispers in his ears belonged not only to the “jester” that smiled at him by his side, but now... He had his mother with him. It was a good deal, honestly... Or maybe not. He could hear Feliciano’s loud voice resonating from the gardens, since the window beside him had a direct view of them. Were they chasing chickens? How on Earth did they manage to bring the chickens here?! They lived in the stables across the palace! Oh, God...

“Should we take a nap, Lovino?”

“... That’s a good idea.”

Lovino’s lips lifted in a faint smile as the strange jester extended a hand towards him. It was warm, really, really warm. Almost hot!

“But you are not coming into my bed, you are too hot.”

“Woah, thank you!”

“It wasn’t a compliment...!”

Now he had another two headaches added to his everlasting headache... May the unicorn bless him with patience because he would sure need some more.

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